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ANCIENT SORCERIES

by Algernon Blackwood

from *Three John Silence Stories*

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I

There are, it would appear, certain wholly unremarkable persons, with none of the characteristics that invite adventure, who yet once or twice in the course of their smooth lives undergo an experience so strange that the world catches its breath--and looks the other way! And it was cases of this kind, perhaps, more than any other, that fell into the wide-spread net of John Silence, the psychic doctor, and, appealing to his deep humanity, to his patience, and to his great qualities of spiritual sympathy, led often to the revelation of problems of the strangest complexity, and of the profoundest possible human interest.

Matters that seemed almost too curious and fantastic for belief he loved to trace to their hidden sources. To unravel a tangle in the very soul of things--and to release a suffering human soul in the process--was with him a veritable passion. And the knots he untied were, indeed, after passing strange.

The world, of course, asks for some plausible basis to which it can attach credence--something it can, at least, pretend to explain. The adventurous type it can understand: such people carry about with them an adequate explanation of their exciting lives, and their characters obviously drive them into the circumstances which produce the adventures. It expects nothing else from them, and is satisfied. But dull, ordinary folk have no right to out-of-the-way experiences, and the world having been led to expect otherwise, is disappointed with them, not to say shocked. Its complacent judgment has been rudely disturbed.

"Such a thing happened to _that_ man!" it cries--"a commonplace person like that! It is too absurd! There must be something wrong!"

Yet there could be no question that something did actually happen to

little Arthur Vezin, something of the curious nature he described to Dr. Silence. Outwardly or inwardly, it happened beyond a doubt, and in spite of the jeers of his few friends who heard the tale, and observed wisely that "such a thing might perhaps have come to Iszard, that crack-brained Iszard, or to that odd fish Minski, but it could never have happened to commonplace little Vezin, who was fore-ordained to live and die according to scale."

But, whatever his method of death was, Vezin certainly did not "live according to scale" so far as this particular event in his otherwise uneventful life was concerned; and to hear him recount it, and watch his pale delicate features change, and hear his voice grow softer and more hushed as he proceeded, was to know the conviction that his halting words perhaps failed sometimes to convey. He lived the thing over again each time he told it. His whole personality became muffled in the recital. It subdued him more than ever, so that the tale became a lengthy apology for an experience that he deprecated. He appeared to excuse himself and ask your pardon for having dared to take part in so fantastic an episode. For little Vezin was a timid, gentle, sensitive soul, rarely able to assert himself, tender to man and beast, and almost constitutionally unable to say No, or to claim many things that should rightly have been his. His whole scheme of life seemed utterly remote from anything more exciting than missing a train or losing an umbrella on an omnibus. And when this curious event came upon him he was already more years beyond forty than his friends suspected or he cared to admit.

John Silence, who heard him speak of his experience more than once, said that he sometimes left out certain details and put in others; yet they were all obviously true. The whole scene was unforgettably cinematographed on to his mind. None of the details were imagined or invented. And when he told the story with them all complete, the effect was undeniable. His appealing brown eyes shone, and much of the charming personality, usually so carefully repressed, came forward and revealed itself. His modesty was always there, of course, but in the telling he forgot the present and allowed himself to appear almost vividly as he lived again in the past of his adventure.

He was on the way home when it happened, crossing northern France from

some mountain trip or other where he buried himself solitary-wise every summer. He had nothing but an unregistered bag in the rack, and the train was jammed to suffocation, most of the passengers being unredeemed holiday English. He disliked them, not because they were his fellow-countrymen, but because they were noisy and obtrusive, obliterating with their big limbs and tweed clothing all the quieter tints of the day that brought him satisfaction and enabled him to melt into insignificance and forget that he was anybody. These English clashed about him like a brass band, making him feel vaguely that he ought to be more self-assertive and obstreperous, and that he did not claim insistently enough all kinds of things that he didn't want and that were really valueless, such as corner seats, windows up or down, and so forth.

So that he felt uncomfortable in the train, and wished the journey were over and he was back again living with his unmarried sister in Surbiton.

And when the train stopped for ten panting minutes at the little station in northern France, and he got out to stretch his legs on the platform, and saw to his dismay a further batch of the British Isles debouching from another train, it suddenly seemed impossible to him to continue the journey. Even _his_ flabby soul revolted, and the idea of staying a night in the little town and going on next day by a slower, emptier train, flashed into his mind. The guard was already shouting "_en voiture_" and the corridor of his compartment was already packed when the thought came to him. And, for once, he acted with decision and rushed to snatch his bag.

Finding the corridor and steps impassable, he tapped at the window (for he had a corner seat) and begged the Frenchman who sat opposite to hand his luggage out to him, explaining in his wretched French that he intended to break the journey there. And this elderly Frenchman, he declared, gave him a look, half of warning, half of reproach, that to his dying day he could never forget; handed the bag through the window of the moving train; and at the same time poured into his ears a long sentence, spoken rapidly and low, of which he was able to comprehend only the last few words: "_à cause du sommeil et à cause des chats_."

In reply to Dr. Silence, whose singular psychic acuteness at once seized upon this Frenchman as a vital point in the adventure, Vezin admitted that the man had impressed him favourably from the beginning, though without being able to explain why. They had sat facing one another during the four hours of the journey, and though no conversation had passed between them--Vezin was timid about his stuttering French--he confessed that his eyes were being continually drawn to his face, almost, he felt, to rudeness, and that each, by a dozen nameless little politenesses and attentions, had evinced the desire to be kind. The men liked each other and their personalities did not clash, or would not have clashed had they chanced to come to terms of acquaintance. The Frenchman, indeed, seemed to have exercised a silent protective influence over the insignificant little Englishman, and without words or gestures betrayed that he wished him well and would gladly have been of service to him.

"And this sentence that he hurled at you after the bag?" asked John Silence, smiling that peculiarly sympathetic smile that always melted the prejudices of his patient, "were you unable to follow it exactly?"

"It was so quick and low and vehement," explained Vezin, in his small voice, "that I missed practically the whole of it. I only caught the few words at the very end, because he spoke them so clearly, and his face was bent down out of the carriage window so near to mine."

"_À cause du sommeil et à cause des chats'?" repeated Dr. Silence, as though half speaking to himself.

"That's it exactly," said Vezin; "which, I take it, means something like 'because of sleep and because of the cats,' doesn't it?"

"Certainly, that's how I should translate it," the doctor observed shortly, evidently not wishing to interrupt more than necessary.

"And the rest of the sentence--all the first part I couldn't understand, I mean--was a warning not to do something--not to stop in the town, or at some particular place in the town, perhaps. That was the impression it made on me."

Then, of course, the train rushed off, and left Vezin standing on the platform alone and rather forlorn.

The little town climbed in straggling fashion up a sharp hill rising out of the plain at the back of the station, and was crowned by the twin towers of the ruined cathedral peeping over the summit. From the station itself it looked uninteresting and modern, but the fact was that the mediaeval position lay out of sight just beyond the crest. And once he reached the top and entered the old streets, he stepped clean out of modern life into a bygone century. The noise and bustle of the crowded train seemed days away. The spirit of this silent hill-town, remote from tourists and motor-cars, dreaming its own quiet life under the autumn sun, rose up and cast its spell upon him. Long before he recognised this spell he acted under it. He walked softly, almost on tiptoe, down the winding narrow streets where the gables all but met over his head, and he entered the doorway of the solitary inn with a deprecating and modest demeanour that was in itself an apology for intruding upon the place and disturbing its dream.

At first, however, Vezin said, he noticed very little of all this. The attempt at analysis came much later. What struck him then was only the delightful contrast of the silence and peace after the dust and noisy rattle of the train. He felt soothed and stroked like a cat.

"Like a cat, you said?" interrupted John Silence, quickly catching him up.

"Yes. At the very start I felt that." He laughed apologetically. "I felt as though the warmth and the stillness and the comfort made me purr. It seemed to be the general mood of the whole place--then."

The inn, a rambling ancient house, the atmosphere of the old coaching days still about it, apparently did not welcome him too warmly. He felt he was only tolerated, he said. But it was cheap and comfortable, and the delicious cup of afternoon tea he ordered at once made him feel really very pleased with himself for leaving the train in this bold, original way. For to him it had seemed bold and original. He felt

something of a dog. His room, too, soothed him with its dark panelling and low irregular ceiling, and the long sloping passage that led to it seemed the natural pathway to a real Chamber of Sleep--a little dim cubby hole out of the world where noise could not enter. It looked upon the courtyard at the back. It was all very charming, and made him think of himself as dressed in very soft velvet somehow, and the floors seemed padded, the walls provided with cushions. The sounds of the streets could not penetrate there. It was an atmosphere of absolute rest that surrounded him.

On engaging the two-franc room he had interviewed the only person who seemed to be about that sleepy afternoon, an elderly waiter with Dundreary whiskers and a drowsy courtesy, who had ambled lazily towards him across the stone yard; but on coming downstairs again for a little promenade in the town before dinner he encountered the proprietress herself. She was a large woman whose hands, feet, and features seemed to swim towards him out of a sea of person. They emerged, so to speak. But she had great dark, vivacious eyes that counteracted the bulk of her body, and betrayed the fact that in reality she was both vigorous and alert. When he first caught sight of her she was knitting in a low chair against the sunlight of the wall, and something at once made him see her as a great tabby cat, dozing, yet awake, heavily sleepy, and yet at the same time prepared for instantaneous action. A great mouser on the watch occurred to him.

She took him in with a single comprehensive glance that was polite without being cordial. Her neck, he noticed, was extraordinarily supple in spite of its proportions, for it turned so easily to follow him, and the head it carried bowed so very flexibly.

"But when she looked at me, you know," said Vezin, with that little apologetic smile in his brown eyes, and that faintly deprecating gesture of the shoulders that was characteristic of him, "the odd notion came to me that really she had intended to make quite a different movement, and that with a single bound she could have leaped at me across the width of that stone yard and pounced upon me like some huge cat upon a mouse."

He laughed a little soft laugh, and Dr. Silence made a note in his book

without interrupting, while Vezin proceeded in a tone as though he feared he had already told too much and more than we could believe.

"Very soft, yet very active she was, for all her size and mass, and I felt she knew what I was doing even after I had passed and was behind her back. She spoke to me, and her voice was smooth and running. She asked if I had my luggage, and was comfortable in my room, and then added that dinner was at seven o'clock, and that they were very early people in this little country town. Clearly, she intended to convey that late hours were not encouraged."

Evidently, she contrived by voice and manner to give him the impression that here he would be "managed," that everything would be arranged and planned for him, and that he had nothing to do but fall into the groove and obey. No decided action or sharp personal effort would be looked for from him. It was the very reverse of the train. He walked quietly out into the street feeling soothed and peaceful. He realised that he was in a milieu that suited him and stroked him the right way. It was so much easier to be obedient. He began to purr again, and to feel that all the town purred with him.

About the streets of that little town he meandered gently, falling deeper and deeper into the spirit of repose that characterised it. With no special aim he wandered up and down, and to and fro. The September sunshine fell slantingly over the roofs. Down winding alleyways, fringed with tumbling gables and open casements, he caught fairylike glimpses of the great plain below, and of the meadows and yellow copses lying like a dream-map in the haze. The spell of the past held very potently here, he felt.

The streets were full of picturesquely garbed men and women, all busy enough, going their respective ways; but no one took any notice of him or turned to stare at his obviously English appearance. He was even able to forget that with his tourist appearance he was a false note in a charming picture, and he melted more and more into the scene, feeling delightfully insignificant and unimportant and unselfconscious. It was like becoming part of a softly coloured dream which he did not even realise to be a dream.

On the eastern side the hill fell away more sharply, and the plain below ran off rather suddenly into a sea of gathering shadows in which the little patches of woodland looked like islands and the stubble fields like deep water. Here he strolled along the old ramparts of ancient fortifications that once had been formidable, but now were only vision-like with their charming mingling of broken grey walls and wayward vine and ivy. From the broad coping on which he sat for a moment, level with the rounded tops of clipped plane trees, he saw the esplanade far below lying in shadow. Here and there a yellow sunbeam crept in and lay upon the fallen yellow leaves, and from the height he looked down and saw that the townsfolk were walking to and fro in the cool of the evening. He could just hear the sound of their slow footfalls, and the murmur of their voices floated up to him through the gaps between the trees. The figures looked like shadows as he caught glimpses of their quiet movements far below.

He sat there for some time pondering, bathed in the waves of murmurs and half-lost echoes that rose to his ears, muffled by the leaves of the plane trees. The whole town, and the little hill out of which it grew as naturally as an ancient wood, seemed to him like a being lying there half asleep on the plain and crooning to itself as it dozed.

And, presently, as he sat lazily melting into its dream, a sound of horns and strings and wood instruments rose to his ears, and the town band began to play at the far end of the crowded terrace below to the accompaniment of a very soft, deep-throated drum. Vezin was very sensitive to music, knew about it intelligently, and had even ventured, unknown to his friends, upon the composition of quiet melodies with low-running chords which he played to himself with the soft pedal when no one was about. And this music floating up through the trees from an invisible and doubtless very picturesque band of the townspeople wholly charmed him. He recognised nothing that they played, and it sounded as though they were simply improvising without a conductor. No definitely marked time ran through the pieces, which ended and began oddly after the fashion of wind through an Aeolian harp. It was part of the place and scene, just as the dying sunlight and faintly breathing wind were part of the scene and hour, and the mellow notes of old-fashioned

plaintive horns, pierced here and there by the sharper strings, all half smothered by the continuous booming of the deep drum, touched his soul with a curiously potent spell that was almost too engrossing to be quite pleasant.

There was a certain queer sense of bewitchment in it all. The music seemed to him oddly unartificial. It made him think of trees swept by the wind, of night breezes singing among wires and chimney-stacks, or in the rigging of invisible ships; or--and the simile leaped up in his thoughts with a sudden sharpness of suggestion--a chorus of animals, of wild creatures, somewhere in desolate places of the world, crying and singing as animals will, to the moon. He could fancy he heard the wailing, half-human cries of cats upon the tiles at night, rising and falling with weird intervals of sound, and this music, muffled by distance and the trees, made him think of a queer company of these creatures on some roof far away in the sky, uttering their solemn music to one another and the moon in chorus.

It was, he felt at the time, a singular image to occur to him, yet it expressed his sensation pictorially better than anything else. The instruments played such impossibly odd intervals, and the crescendos and diminuendos were so very suggestive of cat-land on the tiles at night, rising swiftly, dropping without warning to deep notes again, and all in such strange confusion of discords and accords. But, at the same time a plaintive sweetness resulted on the whole, and the discords of these half-broken instruments were so singular that they did not distress his musical soul like fiddles out of tune.

He listened a long time, wholly surrendering himself as his character was, and then strolled homewards in the dusk as the air grew chilly.

"There was nothing to alarm?" put in Dr. Silence briefly.

"Absolutely nothing," said Vezin; "but you know it was all so fantastical and charming that my imagination was profoundly impressed. Perhaps, too," he continued, gently explanatory, "it was this stirring of my imagination that caused other impressions; for, as I walked back, the spell of the place began to steal over me in a dozen ways, though

all intelligible ways. But there were other things I could not account for in the least, even then."

"Incidents, you mean?"

"Hardly incidents, I think. A lot of vivid sensations crowded themselves upon my mind and I could trace them to no causes. It was just after sunset and the tumbled old buildings traced magical outlines against an opalescent sky of gold and red. The dusk was running down the twisted streets. All round the hill the plain pressed in like a dim sea, its level rising with the darkness. The spell of this kind of scene, you know, can be very moving, and it was so that night. Yet I felt that what came to me had nothing directly to do with the mystery and wonder of the scene."

"Not merely the subtle transformations of the spirit that come with beauty," put in the doctor, noticing his hesitation.

"Exactly," Vezin went on, duly encouraged and no longer so fearful of our smiles at his expense. "The impressions came from somewhere else. For instance, down the busy main street where men and women were bustling home from work, shopping at stalls and barrows, idly gossiping in groups, and all the rest of it, I saw that I aroused no interest and that no one turned to stare at me as a foreigner and stranger. I was utterly ignored, and my presence among them excited no special interest or attention.

"And then, quite suddenly, it dawned upon me with conviction that all the time this indifference and inattention were merely feigned. Everybody as a matter of fact was watching me closely. Every movement I made was known and observed. Ignoring me was all a pretence—an elaborate pretence."

He paused a moment and looked at us to see if we were smiling, and then continued, reassured--

"It is useless to ask me how I noticed this, because I simply cannot explain it. But the discovery gave me something of a shock. Before I got

back to the inn, however, another curious thing rose up strongly in my mind and forced my recognition of it as true. And this, too, I may as well say at once, was equally inexplicable to me. I mean I can only give you the fact, as fact it was to me."

The little man left his chair and stood on the mat before the fire. His diffidence lessened from now onwards, as he lost himself again in the magic of the old adventure. His eyes shone a little already as he talked.

"Well," he went on, his soft voice rising somewhat with his excitement, "I was in a shop when it came to me first--though the idea must have been at work for a long time subconsciously to appear in so complete a form all at once. I was buying socks, I think," he laughed, "and struggling with my dreadful French, when it struck me that the woman in the shop did not care two pins whether I bought anything or not. She was indifferent whether she made a sale or did not make a sale. She was only pretending to sell.

"This sounds a very small and fanciful incident to build upon what follows. But really it was not small. I mean it was the spark that lit the line of powder and ran along to the big blaze in my mind.

"For the whole town, I suddenly realised, was something other than I so far saw it. The real activities and interests of the people were elsewhere and otherwise than appeared. Their true lives lay somewhere out of sight behind the scenes. Their busy-ness was but the outward semblance that masked their actual purposes. They bought and sold, and ate and drank, and walked about the streets, yet all the while the main stream of their existence lay somewhere beyond my ken, underground, in secret places. In the shops and at the stalls they did not care whether I purchased their articles or not; at the inn, they were indifferent to my staying or going; their life lay remote from my own, springing from hidden, mysterious sources, coursing out of sight, unknown. It was all a great elaborate pretence, assumed possibly for my benefit, or possibly for purposes of their own. But the main current of their energies ran elsewhere. I almost felt as an unwelcome foreign substance might be expected to feel when it has found its way into the human system and the

whole body organises itself to eject it or to absorb it. The town was doing this very thing to me.

"This bizarre notion presented itself forcibly to my mind as I walked home to the inn, and I began busily to wonder wherein the true life of this town could lie and what were the actual interests and activities of its hidden life.

"And, now that my eyes were partly opened, I noticed other things too that puzzled me, first of which, I think, was the extraordinary silence of the whole place. Positively, the town was muffled. Although the streets were paved with cobbles the people moved about silently, softly, with padded feet, like cats. Nothing made noise. All was hushed, subdued, muted. The very voices were quiet, low-pitched like purring. Nothing clamorous, vehement or emphatic seemed able to live in the drowsy atmosphere of soft dreaming that soothed this little hill-town into its sleep. It was like the woman at the inn--an outward repose screening intense inner activity and purpose.

"Yet there was no sign of lethargy or sluggishness anywhere about it. The people were active and alert. Only a magical and uncanny softness lay over them all like a spell."

Veizin passed his hand across his eyes for a moment as though the memory had become very vivid. His voice had run off into a whisper so that we heard the last part with difficulty. He was telling a true thing obviously, yet something that he both liked and hated telling.

"I went back to the inn," he continued presently in a louder voice, "and dined. I felt a new strange world about me. My old world of reality receded. Here, whether I liked it or no, was something new and incomprehensible. I regretted having left the train so impulsively. An adventure was upon me, and I loathed adventures as foreign to my nature. Moreover, this was the beginning apparently of an adventure somewhere deep within me, in a region I could not check or measure, and a feeling of alarm mingled itself with my wonder--alarm for the stability of what I had for forty years recognised as my 'personality.'

"I went upstairs to bed, my mind teeming with thoughts that were unusual to me, and of rather a haunting description. By way of relief I kept thinking of that nice, prosaic noisy train and all those wholesome, blustering passengers. I almost wished I were with them again. But my dreams took me elsewhere. I dreamed of cats, and soft-moving creatures, and the silence of life in a dim muffled world beyond the senses."

II

Vezin stayed on from day to day, indefinitely, much longer than he had intended. He felt in a kind of dazed, somnolent condition. He did nothing in particular, but the place fascinated him and he could not decide to leave. Decisions were always very difficult for him and he sometimes wondered how he had ever brought himself to the point of leaving the train. It seemed as though some one else must have arranged it for him, and once or twice his thoughts ran to the swarthy Frenchman who had sat opposite. If only he could have understood that long sentence ending so strangely with "*_à cause du sommeil et à cause des chats_*." He wondered what it all meant.

Meanwhile the hushed softness of the town held him prisoner and he sought in his muddling, gentle way to find out where the mystery lay, and what it was all about. But his limited French and his constitutional hatred of active investigation made it hard for him to buttonhole anybody and ask questions. He was content to observe, and watch, and remain negative.

The weather held on calm and hazy, and this just suited him. He wandered about the town till he knew every street and alley. The people suffered him to come and go without let or hindrance, though it became clearer to him every day that he was never free himself from observation. The town watched him as a cat watches a mouse. And he got no nearer to finding out what they were all so busy with or where the main stream of their activities lay. This remained hidden. The people were as soft and mysterious as cats.

But that he was continually under observation became more evident from

day to day.

For instance, when he strolled to the end of the town and entered a little green public garden beneath the ramparts and seated himself upon one of the empty benches in the sun, he was quite alone—at first. Not another seat was occupied; the little park was empty, the paths deserted. Yet, within ten minutes of his coming, there must have been fully twenty persons scattered about him, some strolling aimlessly along the gravel walks, staring at the flowers, and others seated on the wooden benches enjoying the sun like himself. None of them appeared to take any notice of him; yet he understood quite well they had all come there to watch. They kept him under close observation. In the street they had seemed busy enough, hurrying upon various errands; yet these were suddenly all forgotten and they had nothing to do but loll and laze in the sun, their duties unremembered. Five minutes after he left, the garden was again deserted, the seats vacant. But in the crowded street it was the same thing again; he was never alone. He was ever in their thoughts.

By degrees, too, he began to see how it was he was so cleverly watched, yet without the appearance of it. The people did nothing directly. They behaved obliquely. He laughed in his mind as the thought thus clothed itself in words, but the phrase exactly described it. They looked at him from angles which naturally should have led their sight in another direction altogether. Their movements were oblique, too, so far as these concerned himself. The straight, direct thing was not their way evidently. They did nothing obviously. If he entered a shop to buy, the woman walked instantly away and busied herself with something at the farther end of the counter, though answering at once when he spoke, showing that she knew he was there and that this was only her way of attending to him. It was the fashion of the cat she followed. Even in the dining-room of the inn, the be-whiskered and courteous waiter, lithe and silent in all his movements, never seemed able to come straight to his table for an order or a dish. He came by zigzags, indirectly, vaguely, so that he appeared to be going to another table altogether, and only turned suddenly at the last moment, and was there beside him.

Vezein smiled curiously to himself as he described how he began to

realize these things. Other tourists there were none in the hostel, but he recalled the figures of one or two old men, inhabitants, who took their _déjeuner_ and dinner there, and remembered how fantastically they entered the room in similar fashion. First, they paused in the doorway, peering about the room, and then, after a temporary inspection, they came in, as it were, sideways, keeping close to the walls so that he wondered which table they were making for, and at the last minute making almost a little quick run to their particular seats. And again he thought of the ways and methods of cats.

Other small incidents, too, impressed him as all part of this queer, soft town with its muffled, indirect life, for the way some of the people appeared and disappeared with extraordinary swiftness puzzled him exceedingly. It may have been all perfectly natural, he knew, yet he could not make it out how the alleys swallowed them up and shot them forth in a second of time when there were no visible doorways or openings near enough to explain the phenomenon. Once he followed two elderly women who, he felt, had been particularly examining him from across the street--quite near the inn this was--and saw them turn the corner a few feet only in front of him. Yet when he sharply followed on their heels he saw nothing but an utterly deserted alley stretching in front of him with no sign of a living thing. And the only opening through which they could have escaped was a porch some fifty yards away, which not the swiftest human runner could have reached in time.

And in just such sudden fashion people appeared, when he never expected them. Once when he heard a great noise of fighting going on behind a low wall, and hurried up to see what was going on, what should he see but a group of girls and women engaged in vociferous conversation which instantly hushed itself to the normal whispering note of the town when his head appeared over the wall. And even then none of them turned to look at him directly, but slunk off with the most unaccountable rapidity into doors and sheds across the yard. And their voices, he thought, had sounded so like, so strangely like, the angry snarling of fighting animals, almost of cats.

The whole spirit of the town, however, continued to evade him as something elusive, protean, screened from the outer world, and at the

same time intensely, genuinely vital; and, since he now formed part of its life, this concealment puzzled and irritated him; more--it began rather to frighten him.

Out of the mists that slowly gathered about his ordinary surface thoughts, there rose again the idea that the inhabitants were waiting for him to declare himself, to take an attitude, to do this, or to do that; and that when he had done so they in their turn would at length make some direct response, accepting or rejecting him. Yet the vital matter concerning which his decision was awaited came no nearer to him.

Once or twice he purposely followed little processions or groups of the citizens in order to find out, if possible, on what purpose they were bent; but they always discovered him in time and dwindled away, each individual going his or her own way. It was always the same: he never could learn what their main interest was. The cathedral was ever empty, the old church of St. Martin, at the other end of the town, deserted. They shopped because they had to, and not because they wished to. The booths stood neglected, the stalls unvisited, the little _cafés_ desolate. Yet the streets were always full, the townsfolk ever on the bustle.

"Can it be," he thought to himself, yet with a deprecating laugh that he should have dared to think anything so odd, "can it be that these people are people of the twilight, that they live only at night their real life, and come out honestly only with the dusk? That during the day they make a sham though brave pretence, and after the sun is down their true life begins? Have they the souls of night-things, and is the whole blessed town in the hands of the cats?"

The fancy somehow electrified him with little shocks of shrinking and dismay. Yet, though he affected to laugh, he knew that he was beginning to feel more than uneasy, and that strange forces were tugging with a thousand invisible cords at the very centre of his being. Something utterly remote from his ordinary life, something that had not waked for years, began faintly to stir in his soul, sending feelers abroad into his brain and heart, shaping queer thoughts and penetrating even into certain of his minor actions. Something exceedingly vital to himself, to

his soul, hung in the balance.

And, always when he returned to the inn about the hour of sunset, he saw the figures of the townsfolk stealing through the dusk from their shop doors, moving sentry-wise to and fro at the corners of the streets, yet always vanishing silently like shadows at his near approach. And as the inn invariably closed its doors at ten o'clock he had never yet found the opportunity he rather half-heartedly sought to see for himself what account the town could give of itself at night.

"--à cause du sommeil et à cause des chats"--the words now rang in his ears more and more often, though still as yet without any definite meaning.

Moreover, something made him sleep like the dead.

III

It was, I think, on the fifth day--though in this detail his story sometimes varied--that he made a definite discovery which increased his alarm and brought him up to a rather sharp climax. Before that he had already noticed that a change was going forward and certain subtle transformations being brought about in his character which modified several of his minor habits. And he had affected to ignore them. Here, however, was something he could no longer ignore; and it startled him.

At the best of times he was never very positive, always negative rather, compliant and acquiescent; yet, when necessity arose he was capable of reasonably vigorous action and could take a strongish decision. The discovery he now made that brought him up with such a sharp turn was that this power had positively dwindled to nothing. He found it impossible to make up his mind. For, on this fifth day, he realised that he had stayed long enough in the town and that for reasons he could only vaguely define to himself it was wiser _and safer_ that he should leave.

And he found that he could not leave!

This is difficult to describe in words, and it was more by gesture and the expression of his face that he conveyed to Dr. Silence the state of impotence he had reached. All this spying and watching, he said, had as it were spun a net about his feet so that he was trapped and powerless to escape; he felt like a fly that had blundered into the intricacies of a great web; he was caught, imprisoned, and could not get away. It was a distressing sensation. A numbness had crept over his will till it had become almost incapable of decision. The mere thought of vigorous action--action towards escape--began to terrify him. All the currents of his life had turned inwards upon himself, striving to bring to the surface something that lay buried almost beyond reach, determined to force his recognition of something he had long forgotten--forgotten years upon years, centuries almost ago. It seemed as though a window deep within his being would presently open and reveal an entirely new world, yet somehow a world that was not unfamiliar. Beyond that, again, he fancied a great curtain hung; and when that too rolled up he would see still farther into this region and at last understand something of the secret life of these extraordinary people.

"Is this why they wait and watch?" he asked himself with rather a shaking heart, "for the time when I shall join them--or refuse to join them? Does the decision rest with me after all, and not with them?"

And it was at this point that the sinister character of the adventure first really declared itself, and he became genuinely alarmed. The stability of his rather fluid little personality was at stake, he felt, and something in his heart turned coward.

Why otherwise should he have suddenly taken to walking stealthily, silently, making as little sound as possible, for ever looking behind him? Why else should he have moved almost on tiptoe about the passages of the practically deserted inn, and when he was abroad have found himself deliberately taking advantage of what cover presented itself? And why, if he was not afraid, should the wisdom of staying indoors after sundown have suddenly occurred to him as eminently desirable? Why, indeed?

And, when John Silence gently pressed him for an explanation of these

things, he admitted apologetically that he had none to give.

"It was simply that I feared something might happen to me unless I kept a sharp look-out. I felt afraid. It was instinctive," was all he could say. "I got the impression that the whole town was after me--wanted me for something; and that if it got me I should lose myself, or at least the Self I knew, in some unfamiliar state of consciousness. But I am not a psychologist, you know," he added meekly, "and I cannot define it better than that."

It was while lounging in the courtyard half an hour before the evening meal that Vezin made this discovery, and he at once went upstairs to his quiet room at the end of the winding passage to think it over alone. In the yard it was empty enough, true, but there was always the possibility that the big woman whom he dreaded would come out of some door, with her pretence of knitting, to sit and watch him. This had happened several times, and he could not endure the sight of her. He still remembered his original fancy, bizarre though it was, that she would spring upon him the moment his back was turned and land with one single crushing leap upon his neck. Of course it was nonsense, but then it haunted him, and once an idea begins to do that it ceases to be nonsense. It has clothed itself in reality.

He went upstairs accordingly. It was dusk, and the oil lamps had not yet been lit in the passages. He stumbled over the uneven surface of the ancient flooring, passing the dim outlines of doors along the corridor--doors that he had never once seen opened--rooms that seemed never occupied. He moved, as his habit now was, stealthily and on tiptoe.

Half-way down the last passage to his own chamber there was a sharp turn, and it was just here, while groping round the walls with outstretched hands, that his fingers touched something that was not wall--something that moved. It was soft and warm in texture, indescribably fragrant, and about the height of his shoulder; and he immediately thought of a furry, sweet-smelling kitten. The next minute he knew it was something quite different.

Instead of investigating, however,--his nerves must have been too overwrought for that, he said,--he shrank back as closely as possible against the wall on the other side. The thing, whatever it was, slipped past him with a sound of rustling and, retreating with light footsteps down the passage behind him, was gone. A breath of warm, scented air was wafted to his nostrils.

Vezin caught his breath for an instant and paused, stockstill, half leaning against the wall--and then almost ran down the remaining distance and entered his room with a rush, locking the door hurriedly behind him. Yet it was not fear that made him run: it was excitement, pleasurable excitement. His nerves were tingling, and a delicious glow made itself felt all over his body. In a flash it came to him that this was just what he had felt twenty-five years ago as a boy when he was in love for the first time. Warm currents of life ran all over him and mounted to his brain in a whirl of soft delight. His mood was suddenly become tender, melting, loving.

The room was quite dark, and he collapsed upon the sofa by the window, wondering what had happened to him and what it all meant. But the only thing he understood clearly in that instant was that something in him had swiftly, magically changed: he no longer wished to leave, or to argue with himself about leaving. The encounter in the passage-way had changed all that. The strange perfume of it still hung about him, bemusing his heart and mind. For he knew that it was a girl who had passed him, a girl's face that his fingers had brushed in the darkness, and he felt in some extraordinary way as though he had been actually kissed by her, kissed full upon the lips.

Trembling, he sat upon the sofa by the window and struggled to collect his thoughts. He was utterly unable to understand how the mere passing of a girl in the darkness of a narrow passage-way could communicate so electric a thrill to his whole being that he still shook with the sweetness of it. Yet, there it was! And he found it as useless to deny as to attempt analysis. Some ancient fire had entered his veins, and now ran coursing through his blood; and that he was forty-five instead of twenty did not matter one little jot. Out of all the inner turmoil and confusion emerged the one salient fact that the mere atmosphere, the

merest casual touch, of this girl, unseen, unknown in the darkness, had been sufficient to stir dormant fires in the centre of his heart, and rouse his whole being from a state of feeble sluggishness to one of tearing and tumultuous excitement.

After a time, however, the number of Vezin's years began to assert their cumulative power; he grew calmer, and when a knock came at length upon his door and he heard the waiter's voice suggesting that dinner was nearly over, he pulled himself together and slowly made his way downstairs into the dining-room.

Every one looked up as he entered, for he was very late, but he took his customary seat in the far corner and began to eat. The trepidation was still in his nerves, but the fact that he had passed through the courtyard and hall without catching sight of a petticoat served to calm him a little. He ate so fast that he had almost caught up with the current stage of the table d'hôte, when a slight commotion in the room drew his attention.

His chair was so placed that the door and the greater portion of the long _salle à manger_ were behind him, yet it was not necessary to turn round to know that the same person he had passed in the dark passage had now come into the room. He felt the presence long before he heard or saw any one. Then he became aware that the old men, the only other guests, were rising one by one in their places, and exchanging greetings with some one who passed among them from table to table. And when at length he turned with his heart beating furiously to ascertain for himself, he saw the form of a young girl, lithe and slim, moving down the centre of the room and making straight for his own table in the corner. She moved wonderfully, with sinuous grace, like a young panther, and her approach filled him with such delicious bewilderment that he was utterly unable to tell at first what her face was like, or discover what it was about the whole presentment of the creature that filled him anew with trepidation and delight.

"Ah, Ma'mselle est de retour!" he heard the old waiter murmur at his side, and he was just able to take in that she was the daughter of the proprietress, when she was upon him, and he heard her voice. She was

addressing him. Something of red lips he saw and laughing white teeth, and stray wisps of fine dark hair about the temples; but all the rest was a dream in which his own emotion rose like a thick cloud before his eyes and prevented his seeing accurately, or knowing exactly what he did. He was aware that she greeted him with a charming little bow; that her beautiful large eyes looked searchingly into his own; that the perfume he had noticed in the dark passage again assailed his nostrils, and that she was bending a little towards him and leaning with one hand on the table at this side. She was quite close to him--that was the chief thing he knew--explaining that she had been asking after the comfort of her mother's guests, and now was introducing herself to the latest arrival--himself.

"M'sieur has already been here a few days," he heard the waiter say; and then her own voice, sweet as singing, replied--

"Ah, but M'sieur is not going to leave us just yet, I hope. My mother is too old to look after the comfort of our guests properly, but now I am here I will remedy all that." She laughed deliciously. "M'sieur shall be well looked after."

Vezein, struggling with his emotion and desire to be polite, half rose to acknowledge the pretty speech, and to stammer some sort of reply, but as he did so his hand by chance touched her own that was resting upon the table, and a shock that was for all the world like a shock of electricity, passed from her skin into his body. His soul wavered and shook deep within him. He caught her eyes fixed upon his own with a look of most curious intentness, and the next moment he knew that he had sat down wordless again on his chair, that the girl was already half-way across the room, and that he was trying to eat his salad with a dessert-spoon and a knife.

Longing for her return, and yet dreading it, he gulped down the remainder of his dinner, and then went at once to his bedroom to be alone with his thoughts. This time the passages were lighted, and he suffered no exciting contretemps; yet the winding corridor was dim with shadows, and the last portion, from the bend of the walls onwards, seemed longer than he had ever known it. It ran downhill like the

pathway on a mountain side, and as he tiptoed softly down it he felt that by rights it ought to have led him clean out of the house into the heart of a great forest. The world was singing with him. Strange fancies filled his brain, and once in the room, with the door securely locked, he did not light the candles, but sat by the open window thinking long, long thoughts that came unbidden in troops to his mind.

IV

This part of the story he told to Dr. Silence, without special coaxing, it is true, yet with much stammering embarrassment. He could not in the least understand, he said, how the girl had managed to affect him so profoundly, and even before he had set eyes upon her. For her mere proximity in the darkness had been sufficient to set him on fire. He knew nothing of enchantments, and for years had been a stranger to anything approaching tender relations with any member of the opposite sex, for he was encased in shyness, and realised his overwhelming defects only too well. Yet this bewitching young creature came to him deliberately. Her manner was unmistakable, and she sought him out on every possible occasion. Chaste and sweet she was undoubtedly, yet frankly inviting; and she won him utterly with the first glance of her shining eyes, even if she had not already done so in the dark merely by the magic of her invisible presence.

"You felt she was altogether wholesome and good!" queried the doctor. "You had no reaction of any sort--for instance, of alarm?"

Vezin looked up sharply with one of his inimitable little apologetic smiles. It was some time before he replied. The mere memory of the adventure had suffused his shy face with blushes, and his brown eyes sought the floor again before he answered.

"I don't think I can quite say that," he explained presently. "I acknowledged certain qualms, sitting up in my room afterwards. A conviction grew upon me that there was something about her--how shall I express it?--well, something unholy. It is not impurity in any sense, physical or mental, that I mean, but something quite indefinable that

gave me a vague sensation of the creeps. She drew me, and at the same time repelled me, more than--than--"

He hesitated, blushing furiously, and unable to finish the sentence.

"Nothing like it has ever come to me before or since," he concluded, with lame confusion. "I suppose it was, as you suggested just now, something of an enchantment. At any rate, it was strong enough to make me feel that I would stay in that awful little haunted town for years if only I could see her every day, hear her voice, watch her wonderful movements, and sometimes, perhaps, touch her hand."

"Can you explain to me what you felt was the source of her power?" John Silence asked, looking purposely anywhere but at the narrator.

"I am surprised that you should ask me such a question," answered Vezin, with the nearest approach to dignity he could manage. "I think no man can describe to another convincingly wherein lies the magic of the woman who ensnares him. I certainly cannot. I can only say this slip of a girl bewitched me, and the mere knowledge that she was living and sleeping in the same house filled me with an extraordinary sense of delight.

"But there's one thing I can tell you," he went on earnestly, his eyes aglow, "namely, that she seemed to sum up and synthesise in herself all the strange hidden forces that operated so mysteriously in the town and its inhabitants. She had the silken movements of the panther, going smoothly, silently to and fro, and the same indirect, oblique methods as the townsfolk, screening, like them, secret purposes of her own--purposes that I was sure had _me_ for their objective. She kept me, to my terror and delight, ceaselessly under observation, yet so carelessly, so consummately, that another man less sensitive, if I may say so"--he made a deprecating gesture--"or less prepared by what had gone before, would never have noticed it at all. She was always still, always reposeful, yet she seemed to be everywhere at once, so that I never could escape from her. I was continually meeting the stare and laughter of her great eyes, in the corners of the rooms, in the passages, calmly looking at me through the windows, or in the busiest parts of the public streets."

Their intimacy, it seems, grew very rapidly after this first encounter which had so violently disturbed the little man's equilibrium. He was naturally very prim, and prim folk live mostly in so small a world that anything violently unusual may shake them clean out of it, and they therefore instinctively distrust originality. But Vezin began to forget his primness after awhile. The girl was always modestly behaved, and as her mother's representative she naturally had to do with the guests in the hotel. It was not out of the way that a spirit of camaraderie should spring up. Besides, she was young, she was charmingly pretty, she was French, and--she obviously liked him.

At the same time, there was something indescribable--a certain indefinable atmosphere of other places, other times--that made him try hard to remain on his guard, and sometimes made him catch his breath with a sudden start. It was all rather like a delirious dream, half delight, half dread, he confided in a whisper to Dr. Silence; and more than once he hardly knew quite what he was doing or saying, as though he were driven forward by impulses he scarcely recognised as his own.

And though the thought of leaving presented itself again and again to his mind, it was each time with less insistence, so that he stayed on from day to day, becoming more and more a part of the sleepy life of this dreamy mediaeval town, losing more and more of his recognisable personality. Soon, he felt, the Curtain within would roll up with an awful rush, and he would find himself suddenly admitted into the secret purposes of the hidden life that lay behind it all. Only, by that time, he would have become transformed into an entirely different being.

And, meanwhile, he noticed various little signs of the intention to make his stay attractive to him: flowers in his bedroom, a more comfortable arm-chair in the corner, and even special little extra dishes on his private table in the dining-room. Conversations, too, with "Mademoiselle Ilsé" became more and more frequent and pleasant, and although they seldom travelled beyond the weather, or the details of the town, the girl, he noticed, was never in a hurry to bring them to an end, and often contrived to interject little odd sentences that he never properly understood, yet felt to be significant.

And it was these stray remarks, full of a meaning that evaded him, that pointed to some hidden purpose of her own and made him feel uneasy. They all had to do, he felt sure, with reasons for his staying on in the town indefinitely.

"And has M'sieur not even yet come to a decision?" she said softly in his ear, sitting beside him in the sunny yard before *_déjeuner_*, the acquaintance having progressed with significant rapidity. "Because, if it's so difficult, we must all try together to help him!"

The question startled him, following upon his own thoughts. It was spoken with a pretty laugh, and a stray bit of hair across one eye, as she turned and peered at him half roguishly. Possibly he did not quite understand the French of it, for her near presence always confused his small knowledge of the language distressingly. Yet the words, and her manner, and something else that lay behind it all in her mind, frightened him. It gave such point to his feeling that the town was waiting for him to make his mind up on some important matter.

At the same time, her voice, and the fact that she was there so close beside him in her soft dark dress, thrilled him inexpressibly.

"It is true I find it difficult to leave," he stammered, losing his way deliciously in the depths of her eyes, "and especially now that Mademoiselle Ilsé has come."

He was surprised at the success of his sentence, and quite delighted with the little gallantry of it. But at the same time he could have bitten his tongue off for having said it.

"Then after all you like our little town, or you would not be pleased to stay on," she said, ignoring the compliment.

"I am enchanted with it, and enchanted with you," he cried, feeling that his tongue was somehow slipping beyond the control of his brain. And he was on the verge of saying all manner of other things of the wildest description, when the girl sprang lightly up from her chair beside him,

and made to go.

"It is *_soupe à l'onion_* to-day!" she cried, laughing back at him through the sunlight, "and I must go and see about it. Otherwise, you know, M'sieur will not enjoy his dinner, and then, perhaps, he will leave us!"

He watched her cross the courtyard, moving with all the grace and lightness of the feline race, and her simple black dress clothed her, he thought, exactly like the fur of the same supple species. She turned once to laugh at him from the porch with the glass door, and then stopped a moment to speak to her mother, who sat knitting as usual in her corner seat just inside the hall-way.

But how was it, then, that the moment his eye fell upon this ungainly woman, the pair of them appeared suddenly as other than they were? Whence came that transforming dignity and sense of power that enveloped them both as by magic? What was it about that massive woman that made her appear instantly regal, and set her on a throne in some dark and dreadful scenery, wielding a sceptre over the red glare of some tempestuous orgy? And why did this slender stripling of a girl, graceful as a willow, lithe as a young leopard, assume suddenly an air of sinister majesty, and move with flame and smoke about her head, and the darkness of night beneath her feet?

Vezin caught his breath and sat there transfixed. Then, almost simultaneously with its appearance, the queer notion vanished again, and the sunlight of day caught them both, and he heard her laughing to her mother about the *_soupe à l'onion_*, and saw her glancing back at him over her dear little shoulder with a smile that made him think of a dew-kissed rose bending lightly before summer airs.

And, indeed, the onion soup was particularly excellent that day, because he saw another cover laid at his small table, and, with fluttering heart, heard the waiter murmur by way of explanation that "Ma'mselle Ilse would honour M'sieur to-day at *_déjeuner_*, as her custom sometimes is with her mother's guests."

So actually she sat by him all through that delirious meal, talking quietly to him in easy French, seeing that he was well looked after, mixing the salad-dressing, and even helping him with her own hand. And, later in the afternoon, while he was smoking in the courtyard, longing for a sight of her as soon as her duties were done, she came again to his side, and when he rose to meet her, she stood facing him a moment, full of a perplexing sweet shyness before she spoke--

"My mother thinks you ought to know more of the beauties of our little town, and _I_ think so too! Would M'sieur like me to be his guide, perhaps? I can show him everything, for our family has lived here for many generations."

She had him by the hand, indeed, before he could find a single word to express his pleasure, and led him, all unresisting, out into the street, yet in such a way that it seemed perfectly natural she should do so, and without the faintest suggestion of boldness or immodesty. Her face glowed with the pleasure and interest of it, and with her short dress and tumbled hair she looked every bit the charming child of seventeen that she was, innocent and playful, proud of her native town, and alive beyond her years to the sense of its ancient beauty.

So they went over the town together, and she showed him what she considered its chief interest: the tumble-down old house where her forebears had lived; the sombre, aristocratic-looking mansion where her mother's family dwelt for centuries, and the ancient market-place where several hundred years before the witches had been burnt by the score. She kept up a lively running stream of talk about it all, of which he understood not a fiftieth part as he trudged along by her side, cursing his forty-five years and feeling all the yearnings of his early manhood revive and jeer at him. And, as she talked, England and Surbiton seemed very far away indeed, almost in another age of the world's history. Her voice touched something immeasurably old in him, something that slept deep. It lulled the surface parts of his consciousness to sleep, allowing what was far more ancient to awaken. Like the town, with its elaborate pretence of modern active life, the upper layers of his being became dulled, soothed, muffled, and what lay underneath began to stir in its sleep. That big Curtain swayed a little to and fro. Presently it

might lift altogether....

He began to understand a little better at last. The mood of the town was reproducing itself in him. In proportion as his ordinary external self became muffled, that inner secret life, that was far more real and vital, asserted itself. And this girl was surely the high-priestess of it all, the chief instrument of its accomplishment. New thoughts, with new interpretations, flooded his mind as she walked beside him through the winding streets, while the picturesque old gabled town, softly coloured in the sunset, had never appeared to him so wholly wonderful and seductive.

And only one curious incident came to disturb and puzzle him, slight in itself, but utterly inexplicable, bringing white terror into the child's face and a scream to her laughing lips. He had merely pointed to a column of blue smoke that rose from the burning autumn leaves and made a picture against the red roofs, and had then run to the wall and called her to his side to watch the flames shooting here and there through the heap of rubbish. Yet, at the sight of it, as though taken by surprise, her face had altered dreadfully, and she had turned and run like the wind, calling out wild sentences to him as she ran, of which he had not understood a single word, except that the fire apparently frightened her, and she wanted to get quickly away from it, and to get him away too.

Yet five minutes later she was as calm and happy again as though nothing had happened to alarm or waken troubled thoughts in her, and they had both forgotten the incident.

They were leaning over the ruined ramparts together listening to the weird music of the band as he had heard it the first day of his arrival. It moved him again profoundly as it had done before, and somehow he managed to find his tongue and his best French. The girl leaned across the stones close beside him. No one was about. Driven by some remorseless engine within he began to stammer something--he hardly knew what--of his strange admiration for her. Almost at the first word she sprang lightly off the wall and came up smiling in front of him, just touching his knees as he sat there. She was hatless as usual, and the

sun caught her hair and one side of her cheek and throat.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she cried, clapping her little hands softly in his face, "so very glad, because that means that if you like me you must also like what I do, and what I belong to."

Already he regretted bitterly having lost control of himself. Something in the phrasing of her sentence chilled him. He knew the fear of embarking upon an unknown and dangerous sea.

"You will take part in our real life, I mean," she added softly, with an indescribable coaxing of manner, as though she noticed his shrinking. "You will come back to us."

Already this slip of a child seemed to dominate him; he felt her power coming over him more and more; something emanated from her that stole over his senses and made him aware that her personality, for all its simple grace, held forces that were stately, imposing, august. He saw her again moving through smoke and flame amid broken and tempestuous scenery, alarmingly strong, her terrible mother by her side. Dimly this shone through her smile and appearance of charming innocence.

"You will, I know," she repeated, holding him with her eyes.

They were quite alone up there on the ramparts, and the sensation that she was overmastering him stirred a wild sensuousness in his blood. The mingled abandon and reserve in her attracted him furiously, and all of him that was man rose up and resisted the creeping influence, at the same time acclaiming it with the full delight of his forgotten youth. An irresistible desire came to him to question her, to summon what still remained to him of his own little personality in an effort to retain the right to his normal self.

The girl had grown quiet again, and was now leaning on the broad wall close beside him, gazing out across the darkening plain, her elbows on the coping, motionless as a figure carved in stone. He took his courage in both hands.

"Tell me, Ilsé," he said, unconsciously imitating her own purring softness of voice, yet aware that he was utterly in earnest, "what is the meaning of this town, and what is this real life you speak of? And why is it that the people watch me from morning to night? Tell me what it all means? And, tell me," he added more quickly with passion in his voice, "what you really are--yourself?"

She turned her head and looked at him through half-closed eyelids, her growing inner excitement betraying itself by the faint colour that ran like a shadow across her face.

"It seems to me,"--he faltered oddly under her gaze--"that I have some right to know--"

Suddenly she opened her eyes to the full. "You love me, then?" she asked softly.

"I swear," he cried impetuously, moved as by the force of a rising tide, "I never felt before--I have never known any other girl who--"

"Then you have the right to know," she calmly interrupted his confused confession, "for love shares all secrets."

She paused, and a thrill like fire ran swiftly through him. Her words lifted him off the earth, and he felt a radiant happiness, followed almost the same instant in horrible contrast by the thought of death. He became aware that she had turned her eyes upon his own and was speaking again.

"The real life I speak of," she whispered, "is the old, old life within, the life of long ago, the life to which you, too, once belonged, and to which you still belong."

A faint wave of memory troubled the deeps of his soul as her low voice sank into him. What she was saying he knew instinctively to be true, even though he could not as yet understand its full purport. His present life seemed slipping from him as he listened, merging his personality in one that was far older and greater. It was this loss of his present self

that brought to him the thought of death.

"You came here," she went on, "with the purpose of seeking it, and the people felt your presence and are waiting to know what you decide, whether you will leave them without having found it, or whether--"

Her eyes remained fixed upon his own, but her face began to change, growing larger and darker with an expression of age.

"It is their thoughts constantly playing about your soul that makes you feel they watch you. They do not watch you with their eyes. The purposes of their inner life are calling to you, seeking to claim you. You were all part of the same life long, long ago, and now they want you back again among them."

Vezein's timid heart sank with dread as he listened; but the girl's eyes held him with a net of joy so that he had no wish to escape. She fascinated him, as it were, clean out of his normal self.

"Alone, however, the people could never have caught and held you," she resumed. "The motive force was not strong enough; it has faded through all these years. But I"--she paused a moment and looked at him with complete confidence in her splendid eyes--"I possess the spell to conquer you and hold you: the spell of old love. I can win you back again and make you live the old life with me, for the force of the ancient tie between us, if I choose to use it, is irresistible. And I do choose to use it. I still want you. And you, dear soul of my dim past"--she pressed closer to him so that her breath passed across his eyes, and her voice positively sang--"I mean to have you, for you love me and are utterly at my mercy."

Vezein heard, and yet did not hear; understood, yet did not understand. He had passed into a condition of exaltation. The world was beneath his feet, made of music and flowers, and he was flying somewhere far above it through the sunshine of pure delight. He was breathless and giddy with the wonder of her words. They intoxicated him. And, still, the terror of it all, the dreadful thought of death, pressed ever behind her sentences. For flames shot through her voice out of black smoke and

licked at his soul.

And they communicated with one another, it seemed to him, by a process of swift telepathy, for his French could never have compassed all he said to her. Yet she understood perfectly, and what she said to him was like the recital of verses long since known. And the mingled pain and sweetness of it as he listened were almost more than his little soul could hold.

"Yet I came here wholly by chance--" he heard himself saying.

"No," she cried with passion, "you came here because I called to you. I have called to you for years, and you came with the whole force of the past behind you. You had to come, for I own you, and I claim you."

She rose again and moved closer, looking at him with a certain insolence in the face--the insolence of power.

The sun had set behind the towers of the old cathedral and the darkness rose up from the plain and enveloped them. The music of the band had ceased. The leaves of the plane trees hung motionless, but the chill of the autumn evening rose about them and made Vezin shiver. There was no sound but the sound of their voices and the occasional soft rustle of the girl's dress. He could hear the blood rushing in his ears. He scarcely realised where he was or what he was doing. Some terrible magic of the imagination drew him deeply down into the tombs of his own being, telling him in no unfaltering voice that her words shadowed forth the truth. And this simple little French maid, speaking beside him with so strange authority, he saw curiously alter into quite another being. As he stared into her eyes, the picture in his mind grew and lived, dressing itself vividly to his inner vision with a degree of reality he was compelled to acknowledge. As once before, he saw her tall and stately, moving through wild and broken scenery of forests and mountain caverns, the glare of flames behind her head and clouds of shifting smoke about her feet. Dark leaves encircled her hair, flying loosely in the wind, and her limbs shone through the merest rags of clothing. Others were about her, too, and ardent eyes on all sides cast delirious glances upon her, but her own eyes were always for One only, one whom

she held by the hand. For she was leading the dance in some tempestuous orgy to the music of chanting voices, and the dance she led circled about a great and awful Figure on a throne, brooding over the scene through lurid vapours, while innumerable other wild faces and forms crowded furiously about her in the dance. But the one she held by the hand he knew to be himself, and the monstrous shape upon the throne he knew to be her mother.

The vision rose within him, rushing to him down the long years of buried time, crying aloud to him with the voice of memory reawakened.... And then the scene faded away and he saw the clear circle of the girl's eyes gazing steadfastly into his own, and she became once more the pretty little daughter of the innkeeper, and he found his voice again.

"And you," he whispered tremblingly--"you child of visions and enchantment, how is it that you so bewitch me that I loved you even before I saw?"

She drew herself up beside him with an air of rare dignity.

"The call of the Past," she said; "and besides," she added proudly, "in the real life I am a princess--"

"A princess!" he cried.

"--and my mother is a queen!"

At this, little Vezin utterly lost his head. Delight tore at his heart and swept him into sheer ecstasy. To hear that sweet singing voice, and to see those adorable little lips utter such things, upset his balance beyond all hope of control. He took her in his arms and covered her unresisting face with kisses.

But even while he did so, and while the hot passion swept him, he felt that she was soft and loathsome, and that her answering kisses stained his very soul.... And when, presently, she had freed herself and vanished into the darkness, he stood there, leaning against the wall in a state of collapse, creeping with horror from the touch of her yielding

body, and inwardly raging at the weakness that he already dimly realised must prove his undoing.

And from the shadows of the old buildings into which she disappeared there rose in the stillness of the night a singular, long-drawn cry, which at first he took for laughter, but which later he was sure he recognised as the almost human wailing of a cat.

V

For a long time Vezin leant there against the wall, alone with his surging thoughts and emotions. He understood at length that he had done the one thing necessary to call down upon him the whole force of this ancient Past. For in those passionate kisses he had acknowledged the tie of olden days, and had revived it. And the memory of that soft impalpable caress in the darkness of the inn corridor came back to him with a shudder. The girl had first mastered him, and then led him to the one act that was necessary for her purpose. He had been waylaid, after the lapse of centuries--caught, and conquered.

Dimly he realised this, and sought to make plans for his escape. But, for the moment at any rate, he was powerless to manage his thoughts or will, for the sweet, fantastic madness of the whole adventure mounted to his brain like a spell, and he gloried in the feeling that he was utterly enchanted and moving in a world so much larger and wilder than the one he had ever been accustomed to.

The moon, pale and enormous, was just rising over the sea-like plain, when at last he rose to go. Her slanting rays drew all the houses into new perspective, so that their roofs, already glistening with dew, seemed to stretch much higher into the sky than usual, and their gables and quaint old towers lay far away in its purple reaches.

The cathedral appeared unreal in a silver mist. He moved softly, keeping to the shadows; but the streets were all deserted and very silent; the doors were closed, the shutters fastened. Not a soul was astir. The hush of night lay over everything; it was like a town of the dead, a

churchyard with gigantic and grotesque tombstones.

Wondering where all the busy life of the day had so utterly disappeared to, he made his way to a back door that entered the inn by means of the stables, thinking thus to reach his room unobserved. He reached the courtyard safely and crossed it by keeping close to the shadow of the wall. He sidled down it, mincing along on tiptoe, just as the old men did when they entered the *_salle à manger_*. He was horrified to find himself doing this instinctively. A strange impulse came to him, catching him somehow in the centre of his body--an impulse to drop upon all fours and run swiftly and silently. He glanced upwards and the idea came to him to leap up upon his window-sill overhead instead of going round by the stairs. This occurred to him as the easiest, and most natural way. It was like the beginning of some horrible transformation of himself into something else. He was fearfully strung up.

The moon was higher now, and the shadows very dark along the side of the street where he moved. He kept among the deepest of them, and reached the porch with the glass doors.

But here there was light; the inmates, unfortunately, were still about. Hoping to slip across the hall unobserved and reach the stairs, he opened the door carefully and stole in. Then he saw that the hall was not empty. A large dark thing lay against the wall on his left. At first he thought it must be household articles. Then it moved, and he thought it was an immense cat, distorted in some way by the play of light and shadow. Then it rose straight up before him and he saw that it was the proprietress.

What she had been doing in this position he could only venture a dreadful guess, but the moment she stood up and faced him he was aware of some terrible dignity clothing her about that instantly recalled the girl's strange saying that she was a queen. Huge and sinister she stood there under the little oil lamp; alone with him in the empty hall. Awe stirred in his heart, and the roots of some ancient fear. He felt that he must bow to her and make some kind of obeisance. The impulse was fierce and irresistible, as of long habit. He glanced quickly about him. There was no one there. Then he deliberately inclined his head toward

her. He bowed.

"Enfin! M'sieur s'est donc décidé. C'est bien alors. J'en suis contente."

Her words came to him sonorously as through a great open space.

Then the great figure came suddenly across the flagged hall at him and seized his trembling hands. Some overpowering force moved with her and caught him.

"On pourrait faire un p'tit tour ensemble, n'est-ce pas? Nous y allons cette nuit et il faut s'exercer un peu d'avance pour cela. Ilsé, Ilsé, viens donc ici. Viens vite!"

And she whirled him round in the opening steps of some dance that seemed oddly and horribly familiar. They made no sound on the stones, this strangely assorted couple. It was all soft and stealthy. And presently, when the air seemed to thicken like smoke, and a red glare as of flame shot through it, he was aware that some one else had joined them and that his hand the mother had released was now tightly held by the daughter. Ilsé had come in answer to the call, and he saw her with leaves of vervain twined in her dark hair, clothed in tattered vestiges of some curious garment, beautiful as the night, and horribly, odiously, loathsomely seductive.

"To the Sabbath! to the Sabbath!" they cried. "On to the Witches' Sabbath!"

Up and down that narrow hall they danced, the women on each side of him, to the wildest measure he had ever imagined, yet which he dimly, dreadfully remembered, till the lamp on the wall flickered and went out, and they were left in total darkness. And the devil woke in his heart with a thousand vile suggestions and made him afraid.

Suddenly they released his hands and he heard the voice of the mother cry that it was time, and they must go. Which way they went he did not pause to see. He only realised that he was free, and he blundered

through the darkness till he found the stairs and then tore up them to his room as though all hell was at his heels.

He flung himself on the sofa, with his face in his hands, and groaned. Swiftly reviewing a dozen ways of immediate escape, all equally impossible, he finally decided that the only thing to do for the moment was to sit quiet and wait. He must see what was going to happen. At least in the privacy of his own bedroom he would be fairly safe. The door was locked. He crossed over and softly opened the window which gave upon the courtyard and also permitted a partial view of the hall through the glass doors.

As he did so the hum and murmur of a great activity reached his ears from the streets beyond--the sound of footsteps and voices muffled by distance. He leaned out cautiously and listened. The moonlight was clear and strong now, but his own window was in shadow, the silver disc being still behind the house. It came to him irresistibly that the inhabitants of the town, who a little while before had all been invisible behind closed doors, were now issuing forth, busy upon some secret and unholy errand. He listened intently.

At first everything about him was silent, but soon he became aware of movements going on in the house itself. Rustlings and cheepings came to him across that still, moonlit yard. A concourse of living beings sent the hum of their activity into the night. Things were on the move everywhere. A biting, pungent odour rose through the air, coming he knew not whence. Presently his eyes became glued to the windows of the opposite wall where the moonshine fell in a soft blaze. The roof overhead, and behind him, was reflected clearly in the panes of glass, and he saw the outlines of dark bodies moving with long footsteps over the tiles and along the coping. They passed swiftly and silently, shaped like immense cats, in an endless procession across the pictured glass, and then appeared to leap down to a lower level where he lost sight of them. He just caught the soft thudding of their leaps. Sometimes their shadows fell upon the white wall opposite, and then he could not make out whether they were the shadows of human beings or of cats. They seemed to change swiftly from one to the other. The transformation looked horribly real, for they leaped like human beings, yet changed

swiftly in the air immediately afterwards, and dropped like animals.

The yard, too, beneath him, was now alive with the creeping movements of dark forms all stealthily drawing towards the porch with the glass doors. They kept so closely to the wall that he could not determine their actual shape, but when he saw that they passed on to the great congregation that was gathering in the hall, he understood that these were the creatures whose leaping shadows he had first seen reflected in the windowpanes opposite. They were coming from all parts of the town, reaching the appointed meeting-place across the roofs and tiles, and springing from level to level till they came to the yard.

Then a new sound caught his ear, and he saw that the windows all about him were being softly opened, and that to each window came a face. A moment later figures began dropping hurriedly down into the yard. And these figures, as they lowered themselves down from the windows, were human, he saw; but once safely in the yard they fell upon all fours and changed in the swiftest possible second into--cats--huge, silent cats. They ran in streams to join the main body in the hall beyond.

So, after all, the rooms in the house had not been empty and unoccupied.

Moreover, what he saw no longer filled him with amazement. For he remembered it all. It was familiar. It had all happened before just so, hundreds of times, and he himself had taken part in it and known the wild madness of it all. The outline of the old building changed, the yard grew larger, and he seemed to be staring down upon it from a much greater height through smoky vapours. And, as he looked, half remembering, the old pains of long ago, fierce and sweet, furiously assailed him, and the blood stirred horribly as he heard the Call of the Dance again in his heart and tasted the ancient magic of *Ilse* whirling by his side.

Suddenly he started back. A great lithe cat had leaped softly up from the shadows below on to the sill close to his face, and was staring fixedly at him with the eyes of a human. "Come," it seemed to say, "come with us to the Dance! Change as of old! Transform yourself swiftly and come!" Only too well he understood the creature's soundless call.

It was gone again in a flash with scarcely a sound of its padded feet on the stones, and then others dropped by the score down the side of the house, past his very eyes, all changing as they fell and darting away rapidly, softly, towards the gathering point. And again he felt the dreadful desire to do likewise; to murmur the old incantation, and then drop upon hands and knees and run swiftly for the great flying leap into the air. Oh, how the passion of it rose within him like a flood, twisting his very entrails, sending his heart's desire flaming forth into the night for the old, old Dance of the Sorcerers at the Witches' Sabbath! The whirl of the stars was about him; once more he met the magic of the moon. The power of the wind, rushing from precipice and forest, leaping from cliff to cliff across the valleys, tore him away.... He heard the cries of the dancers and their wild laughter, and with this savage girl in his embrace he danced furiously about the dim Throne where sat the Figure with the sceptre of majesty....

Then, suddenly, all became hushed and still, and the fever died down a little in his heart. The calm moonlight flooded a courtyard empty and deserted. They had started. The procession was off into the sky. And he was left behind--alone.

Vezein tiptoed softly across the room and unlocked the door. The murmur from the streets, growing momentarily as he advanced, met his ears. He made his way with the utmost caution down the corridor. At the head of the stairs he paused and listened. Below him, the hall where they had gathered was dark and still, but through opened doors and windows on the far side of the building came the sound of a great throng moving farther and farther into the distance.

He made his way down the creaking wooden stairs, dreading yet longing to meet some straggler who should point the way, but finding no one; across the dark hall, so lately thronged with living, moving things, and out through the opened front doors into the street. He could not believe that he was really left behind, really forgotten, that he had been purposely permitted to escape. It perplexed him.

Nervously he peered about him, and up and down the street; then, seeing

nothing, advanced slowly down the pavement.

The whole town, as he went, showed itself empty and deserted, as though a great wind had blown everything alive out of it. The doors and windows of the houses stood open to the night; nothing stirred; moonlight and silence lay over all. The night lay about him like a cloak. The air, soft and cool, caressed his cheek like the touch of a great furry paw. He gained confidence and began to walk quickly, though still keeping to the shadowed side. Nowhere could he discover the faintest sign of the great unholy exodus he knew had just taken place. The moon sailed high over all in a sky cloudless and serene.

Hardly realising where he was going, he crossed the open market-place and so came to the ramparts, whence he knew a pathway descended to the high road and along which he could make good his escape to one of the other little towns that lay to the northward, and so to the railway.

But first he paused and gazed out over the scene at his feet where the great plain lay like a silver map of some dream country. The still beauty of it entered his heart, increasing his sense of bewilderment and unreality. No air stirred, the leaves of the plane trees stood motionless, the near details were defined with the sharpness of day against dark shadows, and in the distance the fields and woods melted away into haze and shimmering mistiness.

But the breath caught in his throat and he stood stockstill as though transfixed when his gaze passed from the horizon and fell upon the near prospect in the depth of the valley at his feet. The whole lower slopes of the hill, that lay hid from the brightness of the moon, were aglow, and through the glare he saw countless moving forms, shifting thick and fast between the openings of the trees; while overhead, like leaves driven by the wind, he discerned flying shapes that hovered darkly one moment against the sky and then settled down with cries and weird singing through the branches into the region that was aflame.

Spellbound, he stood and stared for a time that he could not measure. And then, moved by one of the terrible impulses that seemed to control the whole adventure, he climbed swiftly upon the top of the broad

coping, and balanced a moment where the valley gaped at his feet. But in that very instant, as he stood hovering, a sudden movement among the shadows of the houses caught his eye, and he turned to see the outline of a large animal dart swiftly across the open space behind him, and land with a flying leap upon the top of the wall a little lower down. It ran like the wind to his feet and then rose up beside him upon the ramparts. A shiver seemed to run through the moonlight, and his sight trembled for a second. His heart pulsed fearfully. Ilsé stood beside him, peering into his face.

Some dark substance, he saw, stained the girl's face and skin, shining in the moonlight as she stretched her hands towards him; she was dressed in wretched tattered garments that yet became her mightily; rue and vervain twined about her temples; her eyes glittered with unholy light. He only just controlled the wild impulse to take her in his arms and leap with her from their giddy perch into the valley below.

"See!" she cried, pointing with an arm on which the rags fluttered in the rising wind towards the forest aglow in the distance. "See where they await us! The woods are alive! Already the Great Ones are there, and the dance will soon begin! The salve is here! Anoint yourself and come!"

Though a moment before the sky was clear and cloudless, yet even while she spoke the face of the moon grew dark and the wind began to toss in the crests of the plane trees at his feet. Stray gusts brought the sounds of hoarse singing and crying from the lower slopes of the hill, and the pungent odour he had already noticed about the courtyard of the inn rose about him in the air.

"Transform, transform!" she cried again, her voice rising like a song. "Rub well your skin before you fly. Come! Come with me to the Sabbath, to the madness of its furious delight, to the sweet abandonment of its evil worship! See! the Great Ones are there, and the terrible Sacraments prepared. The Throne is occupied. Anoint and come! Anoint and come!"

She grew to the height of a tree beside him, leaping upon the wall with flaming eyes and hair strewn upon the night. He too began to change

swiftly. Her hands touched the skin of his face and neck, streaking him with the burning salve that sent the old magic into his blood with the power before which fades all that is good.

A wild roar came up to his ears from the heart of the wood, and the girl, when she heard it, leaped upon the wall in the frenzy of her wicked joy.

"Satan is there!" she screamed, rushing upon him and striving to draw him with her to the edge of the wall. "Satan has come. The Sacraments call us! Come, with your dear apostate soul, and we will worship and dance till the moon dies and the world is forgotten!"

Just saving himself from the dreadful plunge, Vezin struggled to release himself from her grasp, while the passion tore at his reins and all but mastered him. He shrieked aloud, not knowing what he said, and then he shrieked again. It was the old impulses, the old awful habits instinctively finding voice; for though it seemed to him that he merely shrieked nonsense, the words he uttered really had meaning in them, and were intelligible. It was the ancient call. And it was heard below. It was answered.

The wind whistled at the skirts of his coat as the air round him darkened with many flying forms crowding upwards out of the valley. The crying of hoarse voices smote upon his ears, coming closer. Strokes of wind buffeted him, tearing him this way and that along the crumbling top of the stone wall; and Ilsé clung to him with her long shining arms, smooth and bare, holding him fast about the neck. But not Ilsé alone, for a dozen of them surrounded him, dropping out of the air. The pungent odour of the anointed bodies stifled him, exciting him to the old madness of the Sabbath, the dance of the witches and sorcerers doing honour to the personified Evil of the world.

"Anoint and away! Anoint and away!" they cried in wild chorus about him. "To the Dance that never dies! To the sweet and fearful fantasy of evil!"

Another moment and he would have yielded and gone, for his will turned

soft and the flood of passionate memory all but overwhelmed him, when--so can a small thing after the whole course of an adventure--he caught his foot upon a loose stone in the edge of the wall, and then fell with a sudden crash on to the ground below. But he fell towards the houses, in the open space of dust and cobblestones, and fortunately not into the gaping depth of the valley on the farther side.

And they, too, came in a tumbling heap about him, like flies upon a piece of food, but as they fell he was released for a moment from the power of their touch, and in that brief instant of freedom there flashed into his mind the sudden intuition that saved him. Before he could regain his feet he saw them scrabbling awkwardly back upon the wall, as though bat-like they could only fly by dropping from a height, and had no hold upon him in the open. Then, seeing them perched there in a row like cats upon a roof, all dark and singularly shapeless, their eyes like lamps, the sudden memory came back to him of Ilsé's terror at the sight of fire.

Quick as a flash he found his matches and lit the dead leaves that lay under the wall.

Dry and withered, they caught fire at once, and the wind carried the flame in a long line down the length of the wall, licking upwards as it ran; and with shrieks and wailings, the crowded row of forms upon the top melted away into the air on the other side, and were gone with a great rush and whirring of their bodies down into the heart of the haunted valley, leaving Vezin breathless and shaken in the middle of the deserted ground.

"Ilsé!" he called feebly; "Ilsé!" for his heart ached to think that she was really gone to the great Dance without him, and that he had lost the opportunity of its fearful joy. Yet at the same time his relief was so great, and he was so dazed and troubled in mind with the whole thing, that he hardly knew what he was saying, and only cried aloud in the fierce storm of his emotion....

The fire under the wall ran its course, and the moonlight came out again, soft and clear, from its temporary eclipse. With one last

shuddering look at the ruined ramparts, and a feeling of horrid wonder for the haunted valley beyond, where the shapes still crowded and flew, he turned his face towards the town and slowly made his way in the direction of the hotel.

And as he went, a great wailing of cries, and a sound of howling, followed him from the gleaming forest below, growing fainter and fainter with the bursts of wind as he disappeared between the houses.

VI

"It may seem rather abrupt to you, this sudden tame ending," said Arthur Vezin, glancing with flushed face and timid eyes at Dr. Silence sitting there with his notebook, "but the fact is--er--from that moment my memory seems to have failed rather. I have no distinct recollection of how I got home or what precisely I did.

"It appears I never went back to the inn at all. I only dimly recollect racing down a long white road in the moonlight, past woods and villages, still and deserted, and then the dawn came up, and I saw the towers of a biggish town and so came to a station.

"But, long before that, I remember pausing somewhere on the road and looking back to where the hill-town of my adventure stood up in the moonlight, and thinking how exactly like a great monstrous cat it lay there upon the plain, its huge front paws lying down the two main streets, and the twin and broken towers of the cathedral marking its torn ears against the sky. That picture stays in my mind with the utmost vividness to this day.

"Another thing remains in my mind from that escape--namely, the sudden sharp reminder that I had not paid my bill, and the decision I made, standing there on the dusty highroad, that the small baggage I had left behind would more than settle for my indebtedness.

"For the rest, I can only tell you that I got coffee and bread at a café on the outskirts of this town I had come to, and soon after found my way to the station and caught a train later in the day. That same evening I

reached London."

"And how long altogether," asked John Silence quietly, "do you think you stayed in the town of the adventure?"

Vezin looked up sheepishly.

"I was coming to that," he resumed, with apologetic wriggings of his body. "In London I found that I was a whole week out in my reckoning of time. I had stayed over a week in the town, and it ought to have been September 15th,--instead of which it was only September 10th!"

"So that, in reality, you had only stayed a night or two in the inn?" queried the doctor.

Vezin hesitated before replying. He shuffled upon the mat.

"I must have gained time somewhere," he said at length--"somewhere or somehow. I certainly had a week to my credit. I can't explain it. I can only give you the fact."

"And this happened to you last year, since when you have never been back to the place?"

"Last autumn, yes," murmured Vezin; "and I have never dared to go back. I think I never want to."

"And, tell me," asked Dr. Silence at length, when he saw that the little man had evidently come to the end of his words and had nothing more to say, "had you ever read up the subject of the old witchcraft practices during the Middle Ages, or been at all interested in the subject?"

"Never!" declared Vezin emphatically. "I had never given a thought to such matters so far as I know--"

"Or to the question of reincarnation, perhaps?"

"Never--before my adventure; but I have since," he replied

significantly.

There was, however, something still on the man's mind that he wished to relieve himself of by confession, yet could only with difficulty bring himself to mention; and it was only after the sympathetic tactfulness of the doctor had provided numerous openings that he at length availed himself of one of them, and stammered that he would like to show him the marks he still had on his neck where, he said, the girl had touched him with her anointed hands.

He took off his collar after infinite fumbling hesitation, and lowered his shirt a little for the doctor to see. And there, on the surface of the skin, lay a faint reddish line across the shoulder and extending a little way down the back towards the spine. It certainly indicated exactly the position an arm might have taken in the act of embracing. And on the other side of the neck, slightly higher up, was a similar mark, though not quite so clearly defined.

"That was where she held me that night on the ramparts," he whispered, a strange light coming and going in his eyes.

* * * * *

It was some weeks later when I again found occasion to consult John Silence concerning another extraordinary case that had come under my notice, and we fell to discussing Vezin's story. Since hearing it, the doctor had made investigations on his own account, and one of his secretaries had discovered that Vezin's ancestors had actually lived for generations in the very town where the adventure came to him. Two of them, both women, had been tried and convicted as witches, and had been burned alive at the stake. Moreover, it had not been difficult to prove that the very inn where Vezin stayed was built about 1700 upon the spot where the funeral pyres stood and the executions took place. The town was a sort of headquarters for all the sorcerers and witches of the entire region, and after conviction they were burnt there literally by scores.

"It seems strange," continued the doctor, "that Vezin should have

remained ignorant of all this; but, on the other hand, it was not the kind of history that successive generations would have been anxious to keep alive, or to repeat to their children. Therefore I am inclined to think he still knows nothing about it.

"The whole adventure seems to have been a very vivid revival of the memories of an earlier life, caused by coming directly into contact with the living forces still intense enough to hang about the place, and, by a most singular chance, too, with the very souls who had taken part with him in the events of that particular life. For the mother and daughter who impressed him so strangely must have been leading actors, with himself, in the scenes and practices of witchcraft which at that period dominated the imaginations of the whole country.

"One has only to read the histories of the times to know that these witches claimed the power of transforming themselves into various animals, both for the purposes of disguise and also to convey themselves swiftly to the scenes of their imaginary orgies. Lycanthropy, or the power to change themselves into wolves, was everywhere believed in, and the ability to transform themselves into cats by rubbing their bodies with a special salve or ointment provided by Satan himself, found equal credence. The witchcraft trials abound in evidences of such universal beliefs."

Dr. Silence quoted chapter and verse from many writers on the subject, and showed how every detail of Vezin's adventure had a basis in the practices of those dark days.

"But that the entire affair took place subjectively in the man's own consciousness, I have no doubt," he went on, in reply to my questions; "for my secretary who has been to the town to investigate, discovered his signature in the visitors' book, and proved by it that he had arrived on September 8th, and left suddenly without paying his bill. He left two days later, and they still were in possession of his dirty brown bag and some tourist clothes. I paid a few francs in settlement of his debt, and have sent his luggage on to him. The daughter was absent from home, but the proprietress, a large woman very much as he described her, told my secretary that he had seemed a very strange, absent-minded

kind of gentleman, and after his disappearance she had feared for a long time that he had met with a violent end in the neighbouring forest where he used to roam about alone.

"I should like to have obtained a personal interview with the daughter so as to ascertain how much was subjective and how much actually took place with her as Vezin told it. For her dread of fire and the sight of burning must, of course, have been the intuitive memory of her former painful death at the stake, and have thus explained why he fancied more than once that he saw her through smoke and flame."

"And that mark on his skin, for instance?" I inquired.

"Merely the marks produced by hysterical brooding," he replied, "like the stigmata of the _religieuses_, and the bruises which appear on the bodies of hypnotised subjects who have been told to expect them. This is very common and easily explained. Only it seems curious that these marks should have remained so long in Vezin's case. Usually they disappear quickly."

"Obviously he is still thinking about it all, brooding, and living it all over again," I ventured.

"Probably. And this makes me fear that the end of his trouble is not yet. We shall hear of him again. It is a case, alas! I can do little to alleviate."

Dr. Silence spoke gravely and with sadness in his voice.

"And what do you make of the Frenchman in the train?" I asked further--"the man who warned him against the place, _à cause du sommeil et à cause des chats?_ Surely a very singular incident?"

"A very singular incident indeed," he made answer slowly, "and one I can only explain on the basis of a highly improbable coincidence--"

"Namely?"

"That the man was one who had himself stayed in the town and undergone there a similar experience. I should like to find this man and ask him. But the crystal is useless here, for I have no slightest clue to go upon, and I can only conclude that some singular psychic affinity, some force still active in his being out of the same past life, drew him thus to the personality of Vezin, and enabled him to fear what might happen to him, and thus to warn him as he did.

"Yes," he presently continued, half talking to himself, "I suspect in this case that Vezin was swept into the vortex of forces arising out of the intense activities of a past life, and that he lived over again a scene in which he had often played a leading part centuries before. For strong actions set up forces that are so slow to exhaust themselves, they may be said in a sense never to die. In this case they were not vital enough to render the illusion complete, so that the little man found himself caught in a very distressing confusion of the present and the past; yet he was sufficiently sensitive to recognise that it was true, and to fight against the degradation of returning, even in memory, to a former and lower state of development.

"Ah yes!" he continued, crossing the floor to gaze at the darkening sky, and seemingly quite oblivious of my presence, "subliminal up-rushes of memory like this can be exceedingly painful, and sometimes exceedingly dangerous. I only trust that this gentle soul may soon escape from this obsession of a passionate and tempestuous past. But I doubt it, I doubt it."

His voice was hushed with sadness as he spoke, and when he turned back into the room again there was an expression of profound yearning upon his face, the yearning of a soul whose desire to help is sometimes greater than his power.

WHEELS WITHIN

by Charles De Vet

EBook #32127

Never ask "Who am I and where do I come from?" The answers may not be what you'd expect!

"When did the headaches first start?" asked the neurologist, Dr. Hall.

"About six months ago," Bennett replied.

"What is your occupation, Mr. Bennett?"

"I am a contractor."

"Are you happy in your work?"

"Very. I prefer it to any other occupation I know of."

"When your headaches become sufficiently severe, you say that you have hallucinations," Hall said. "Can you describe what you see during those hallucinations?"

"At first I had only the impression that I was in a place completely unlike anything I had ever known," Bennett answered. "But each time my impressions became sharper, and I carried a fairly clear picture when my mind returned to normal the last time. I felt then that I had been in a room in a tall building that towered thousands of feet over a great city. I even remembered that the name of the city was Thone. There were other people in the room with me--one person especially. I remembered her very clearly."

"Her?" Hall asked.

"Yes."

"Was there anything unusual about this woman?"

"Well, yes, there was," Bennett said, after a brief and almost embarrassed pause. "This will sound pretty adolescent, but--"

Hall leaned forward attentively. "It may be relevant. You're not here to be judged, you know; I'm trying to help you."

Bennett nodded and spoke rapidly, as though trying to finish before he could stop himself. "She was a woman who exactly fitted an image I've had in mind for as long as I can remember. She was tall, fair--though brunette--very beautiful, very vivid, very well poised. I seem to have known her all my life, but only in my dreams, from my very earliest ones to the present. She's never changed in all that time."

He halted as suddenly as he had begun to talk, either having nothing more to say, or unwilling to say it.

"Have you ever married, Mr. Bennett?" Hall prodded gently.

"No, I never have." Again, Bennett stopped, adding nothing more to his blunt answer.

"May I ask why not?"

Bennett turned his face away. "I was hoping you wouldn't ask that. It makes me sound like a romantic kid." He looked at the doctor almost in defiance. "I've always felt that some day I would meet this girl, or at least someone very much like her. I know it's not a rational feeling--maybe I've even used it as an excuse not to get married--but it's like spilling salt and throwing a pinch over our shoulder; we aren't superstitious, yet we don't take any chances."

Dr. Hall didn't comment. He ended the questioning period and put Bennett through a series of tests. Then they sat down again and Hall offered his diagnosis.

"The neurological examination is essentially negative, Mr. Bennett. In

other words, there is no organic reason that I can find for your headaches. That leaves only one other possibility--an emotional disturbance. I'm a neurologist, remember, not a psychoanalyst. I can only give an opinion about the cause of your complaint."

Bennett waited expectantly.

"Headaches without organic causes are generally the result of repressed anger," Hall went on. "That anger can stem from any number of traumatic situations or attitudes, all deeply buried in the unconscious, of course, or they would not have the power to hurt us. From what we know of you, however, it seems to be the result of frustration. In other words, you have created a fantasy image of a completely unattainable woman, and therefore none of the women you meet can fulfill your expectations. Since she is unattainable, you naturally feel a sense of frustration."

"But who could she be?" Bennett asked anxiously.

"Someone you knew in childhood, perhaps. A composite of real and imaginary women. Usually, it is an idealized image of your own mother."

Bennett sat frowning. "All right, let's say that's so. But where do the hallucinations of the city of Thone fit in?"

"This is something that has to be tracked down in a series of analytical sessions, so all I can do is guess. If one is unable to reach a goal in a real environment, the obvious answer is to create a fantasy world. That's what you appear to be doing. It's a dangerous situation, Mr. Bennett. Potentially, at least."

"How so?" Bennett asked, alarmed.

"The general tendency is toward greater and greater divorcement from reality. I suggest immediate treatment by a competent analyst. If you don't know of one, I can recommend several."

"I'd like to think it over."

"Do that," Hall said. "And call me when you've decided."

* * * * *

The third day after he consulted the neurologist, Bennett's headache returned. As before, drugs were of no help. When the pain became blinding, he lay back on his bed, placed a cold cloth on his forehead, and closed his eyes.

Suddenly the realities he knew were gone and he was back in the dream-city of Thone.

Persons and objects were much clearer now. Bennett saw that he lay in a receptacle shaped like a rectangular metal box. It was padded, reminding him unpleasantly of a coffin. The woman he had seen before was again with him, but now he knew that her name was Lima. Behind her stood a man; a tall, dark man whose eyebrows joined over the bridge of his nose, and whose forehead was creased in a permanent frown. The woman held out her arms to Bennett. Her lips moved, but no sound came from them.

Bennett's spirit seemed to rise from the flesh--he could see his body still lying there--and he followed the woman. As he approached she retreated and, try as he would to reach her, she remained just beyond his grasp.

After what seemed hours of futile pursuit, a cloud formed between him and the woman. When it dissipated, he had left the world of Thone. He was in a trolley-bus, in his own world, and vaguely he recalled having left his room, gone down to the street, and boarded the trolley--during the time he had followed Lima, in his hallucination. It seemed that he had a definite destination then, but now he could not recall what it had been.

His attention was drawn to the outside by the flickering of lights that flashed in through the bus windows. Bennett looked out and saw

that he was in the Pleasure Section of the city, traveling through the Street of Carnivals. He watched the fronts of the amusement buildings pass before him and he read their advertisements listlessly.

Suddenly one sign seemed to spring out from all the others:

LIMA
MYSTIC OF THE MIND

He left the trolley at the next corner and made his way through the crowd to the brightly lit carnival building.

Inside, he found a chair and seated himself. The show's act appeared about half over. It was pretty evidently charlatan stuff, Bennett decided, but the black-hooded mystic on the stage held his attention. She was a tall woman, with a slender figure and fair flesh. She was poised, or perhaps it was indifference to the crowd.

A runner went through the audience touching articles of clothing or ornaments, and the woman without hesitation named each one he touched. The act was slightly different from most Bennett had seen in that the runner said nothing, merely touching the articles to be named.

The next portion of the show consisted of a mind-reading act. Bennett expected the usual routine of writing a question on paper, which would be sealed in an envelope and placed in a container on the stage.

He was surprised when the runner returned to the crowd and asked for volunteers for thought-reading.

A short man with a bright yellow necktie raised his hand. The runner made his way through the crowd to the man and touched him on the shoulder before turning back to the mystic. He still said nothing.

"This man is thinking that he should have stayed at home tonight," the mystic said. "There are wrestling matches on the teletone, and he would have enjoyed them more than this show. Besides, he would have spent less money that way than he has tonight. And he does not like

to spend money unless he must."

A titter of amusement went through the crowd as the man blushed a dull crimson.

The runner touched a second man.

"This man wishes to know the winner in the eighth race at the horse tracks tomorrow," she said. "I am sorry, but, because of Public Law one thousand thirty-two, Section five-A, I am prohibited from answering a question of that nature."

The third person contacted was a woman. She raised her hand, then half changed her mind when she saw that the runner was turning toward her. But then she defiantly tossed her brown hair back from her face and allowed him to touch her shoulder.

"This woman is wondering if her lover is true to her--and if her husband will find out about them."

This time the crowd laughed when the embarrassed woman turned pale and rushed up the aisle toward the exit.

No further hands were raised and the show ended with a short address by the runner: "I hope you have enjoyed these truly marvelous and mysterious demonstrations. Now the mystic, Lima, is available for a short time for personal interviews. The fee is very reasonable--one dollar a minute. Anyone wishing an interview please step forward."

The mystic pulled the hood from her head, smiled, bowed at the crowd, and left the stage.

Bennett gasped.

"The woman of the city of Thone!"

* * * * *

"You have paid in advance for twenty-five minutes of my time," Lima said, as she smiled in amusement. "Perhaps you had better begin your questions, instead of merely staring at me."

Bennett brought his thoughts back with an effort. "Your performance was exceptionally good," he said very soberly. "I enjoyed it. And so, apparently did the other customers. It is a clever routine. I'll admit I can't figure out how you do it."

"Remember what Barnum said," Lima replied lightly.

"At least you do not take yourself too seriously," Bennett observed.

"On the contrary," Lima countered, "I take myself very seriously. You, however, do not. You are paying for my time and the customer is always right."

"Tell me," Bennett asked abruptly, "have we ever met before?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Have you any objections to telling me about yourself during our interview? Who are you? What is your background?"

"I will be glad to tell you about myself, if you think it will be interesting," she replied, after a barely perceptible pause. "How I came by this exceptional ability of mine, I have no slightest conception. I only remember that when I was young, and still without the intellect to evaluate social mores and customs, I was often placed in positions of awkwardness by my ability to read minds. At an early age, however, through the council of my parents, I learned to keep this knowledge to myself.

"By the time I reached my twentieth birthday, my parents were both dead and I was alone in the world. I had never learned any occupation. I made some attempts to use my mind-reading to some advantage to myself, but soon found that I encountered the opposition of the medical associations as well as the law. As a consequence, I turned to

show business as the one means of earning a legitimate livelihood. There is not much more to tell."

"Can you actually read minds?" Bennett asked insistently.

"I can."

"Then what am I thinking now?"

"You are thinking," Lima said, with no semblance of a trance or any of the other usual antics of professional mystics, "that I look exactly like a woman you have never seen, but whose image you have carried in your mind since your childhood."

For just a moment, the startling accuracy disconcerted Bennett.

"I have a problem which is quite annoying," he pushed on almost frantically. "Can you tell me what my problem is?"

"You have been subject to extremely severe headaches, which you have been unable to remedy, either by sedatives or with the help of a neurologist. Am I correct?"

"More than you could possibly know! Look, I came here believing you were a fake. That didn't matter--it was the fact that you looked like this other woman that counted. I'm convinced now. I want your help. Can you help me, or at least tell me whether the neurologist is right about the cause of my headaches?"

"He is wrong," Lima said. "I can tell you what causes them, but I am afraid that I will have to ask for another hundred dollars for that extra service."

Bennett was momentarily irritated at this evidence that their relationship, at least as far as she was concerned, was strictly business. But he shrugged off the feeling. He drew five twenty-dollar bills from his pocketbook and placed them on the table before her.

"If you remember," Lima said, folding the money carefully and tucking it into the neck of her dress, "five months ago a building which you had contracted to build fell, when it was nearly completed, and two workmen were killed."

"I remember very well."

"You found that the collapse of the building was caused by faulty material which you had bought through a subcontractor. You are still investigating to determine where to place the blame, and are on the point of doing so."

"Go on," Bennett breathed softly.

"You are quite certain that the person responsible is John Tournay, ostensibly a reputable contractor, but actually an unscrupulous scoundrel. You have a choice of exposing him, with great personal danger to yourself--Tournay is a dangerous and ruthless man--or remaining silent and knowing that you are a coward. The difficulty of that choice is causing your headaches."

"You may be right," Bennett admitted without hesitation. "I haven't had time to think the matter through quite that far. What would you advise me to do?"

"That is something which cannot be advised. The answer lies within yourself. You are either a big enough man to do the right thing--which you yourself recognize--or you are a small man and will take the safer, less honorable course. The decision and the integrity lie within yourself."

* * * * *

Bennett slumped. "I see that. Then there's nothing more that you can do for me?"

"But there is," Lima replied. "I can cure your headaches, if you wish--for an additional hundred dollars."

"That would be a cheap price." Bennett drew his wallet from his pocket. "My cash is rather low. Would you accept a personal check?"

"Certainly," Lima said. "But, first, let me explain about my cure. There is some mental unpleasantness involved which you may consider worse than the ailment."

"I doubt that. I can't imagine anything worse than this agony."

"Your mind will be placed under my control and led through a dream sequence. I will follow a logical progression of events, using your actual past as background. While you are under my control, your experiences will be far from pleasant. I will allow your mind to follow its own anticipated course of events, influencing your thoughts only slightly--directing them into as unpleasant channels as possible. In fact, to make the cure certain, at least the culmination must be quite devastating. Do you agree to undergo such rigorous mental punishment?"

"But why do I have to?" Bennett asked, astonished and worried.

"That pattern will act in the manner of a counter-irritant. Your mind is like a spoiled child, rejecting anticipated unpleasantness. Under my influence it is subjected to possible alternative experiences, which are so much worse than the one it originally feared that it will gratefully accept the lesser evil."

"That sounds reasonable," Bennett agreed. "When could we begin this treatment?"

"Immediately, if you are willing."

"I see no reason for waiting."

"Then, if you are ready," Lima told him, "lie on this couch. Keep your eyes on mine." She spoke slowly, evenly. "Remember that you are doing this of your own free will, that you trust me. I am your friend and

would do you no harm."

Her voice droned on as Bennett looked into her eyes. They merged until they became one large, placid pool of restfulness, and he found himself drawn into them.

He sank peacefully, quietly--completely.

* * * * *

When the telephone rang, Bennett knew it was the district attorney returning his call, and that the die was cast. Until this ugly business was brought to a conclusion, his life would be in constant danger.

"Leroy Bennett speaking," he said. "I have had collected some information that I think will be of very great interest to your office."

"Information about what?" the voice at the other end asked briskly.

"I have proof that John Tournay is responsible for the death of two men, in an action involving criminal collusion."

"If what you say is true, I will be glad to see your evidence," the district attorney said. "Could you deliver it in person? There may be some questions I would like to ask you about it."

"Certainly," Bennett replied. "When would be the most convenient time?"

"Later in the day. I have a case going on. How would four-thirty this afternoon suit you?"

"That would be fine."

The rest of the day dragged slowly. At four o'clock Bennett left his office and took the elevator to the ground floor. Under his arm he

clutched the briefcase which might spell death for him.

A moment after he left his office building, he knew he had made a mistake--a fatal one!

Idly, at first, his mind's eye watched the driver of a long gray sedan, parked at the curb, start up its motor as he approached. The car pulled away from the curb when he came alongside it.

Through an open rear window, Bennett saw a man with a dark, brooding face--with black eyebrows that joined over the bridge of the nose--glowering at him. At the same instant he saw the blunt nose of an automatic resting on the lowered glass of the window, just below the chin of the frowning man.

Incredibly, even as he realized that he was about to die, Bennett's first thought was not one of fear, but rather that this dark man was the other person he had seen in his hallucinations of the city of Thone!

Then, as one part of his mind drew back in terror at what it knew was about to happen, another part wondered at the mystery of Thone and the people in it. Where did that hallucination fit in this mist of life which was about to end?

He felt three hard, solid blows punch shockingly into his body. There was pain, but greater than that was the terror that whipped his panicked mind.

"Lima," Bennett whispered with his last stark thought as he dropped to his knees.

He groped for the sidewalk with one hand, to steady himself, and never reached it.

* * * * *

"It's over now," Bennett heard the mystic say. "Please try to relax."

He found himself fighting with awful exertion to raise himself from the sidewalk--which had turned into a couch. His clothes clung to him with a clammy wetness that chilled him.

He flung his arms out in a frantic gesture that knocked a lamp from an end-table and sent it crashing to the floor.

Not until then did he feel the mystic's firmly gentle hands on his shoulders, urging him down, and know that he was not actually dying. He lay back for a moment, gasping great gulps of welcome air into his lungs.

"I think you will be all right now," Lima said.

"You were right when you said the experience would not be pleasant," Bennett said, still battling for breath. "I hope the results will be worth it."

"I believe you will find that they are," Lima told him reassuringly. "Also, it can be of assistance to you in still another way. The sequence your dream followed--being a natural, perhaps even a probable, aftermath of your past decisions and movements--could actually happen. Therefore it would be wise to avoid such decisions in real life."

* * * * *

At the end of two weeks, Bennett had collected all the information he needed on Tournay's illegal activities. The investigator he hired was very thorough, and unearthed several other incriminating schemes in Tournay's past. With the evidence he had on hand, Bennett was certain that Tournay would be convicted in any court.

This time he intended to evade the fate he had suffered in the dream by acting differently. He hired a shrewd lawyer--the best obtainable--had him draw up the evidence in legal form, and presented it to the district attorney, with the demand for Tournay's immediate

arrest. He knew that immediate action would be his best protection.

That evening, when he left his office building, he felt the peace of a man whose task has been well done.

It took almost a full second before the sight of the long gray car jerked his thoughts from their pleasant introspection and back to dread reality. Tournay's black-browed face leered at him as it had in the dream and he felt his body tense as it waited for the pistol slugs to strike.

His mind scurried in its trap within his head and, strangely, it turned to the mystic for help.

"Lima!" he called desperately.

* * * * *

Again Bennett felt himself struggling with that awful exertion to drag his body from the couch on which it lay.

"It's all over now," he heard Lima say.

He sat up. "What happened?"

"This will be hard to believe," Lima said, "and I will not try to prove it to you, but it is true. The mind has many powers which cannot even be imagined by anyone who has not lived with those powers as I have. When you called me, your mind attuned itself with mine, and its need and its demand were so powerful that together we turned time backward. You are now back in my dressing room, and it is the exact time at which you originally came out of your dream."

"That's impossible!" Bennett protested.

"Nevertheless, it happened. I only ask you to keep in mind one thing. Someday, when your mind has been made more facile, you will understand how I am able to do this. It will even appear logical to you. Now,

however, the only thing I can tell you is _believe it_!"

* * * * *

Bennett had no intention of mulling this second chance. After he had collected the information about Tournay's criminal activities, he also dug into his past for a man who had cause to hate the contractor. He found the man he sought, a man as ruthless and unscrupulous as Tournay himself, one who could fight him on his own ground.

Roger Clarkson had been the controller of a string of bookie joints, before he had been framed by Tournay, and convicted, to serve ten years in prison.

Clarkson had been released from prison six days before. He found that Tournay had gained control of his former criminal empire. Everyone, including Tournay, knew that the only thing preventing Clarkson from taking revenge was the opportunity.

Bennett sent his information to Clarkson and sat back to await the results. That evening, as he was about to leave his office building, some inner caution warned him to take no chances. He stepped cautiously out into the street, looked both ways for the gray sedan, and saw that the street was empty, before he walked to the corner.

He arrived there just in time to meet the long gray sedan as it drove up.

* * * * *

Once more he fought the awful exertion on the mystic's couch. This time he came out of the blackness with his mind clear. "You've saved me again," he said to Lima. "Have you turned time backward again?"

"Yes," she replied. "But I have given you all the help I can. The next attempt you make, you will have nothing on which to lean except your own strength."

"But why do I always arrive at the point where I'm being shot by Tournay, regardless of what course I choose? Is there no way I can beat him?"

"If you believe in fate as strongly as I do, you will accept that conclusion as inevitable. The long gray sedan is the symbol of your death. You cannot avoid it--at least not as long as you persist in passive action."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just this. You wish to see Tournay punished--your sense of justice demands it. But each time you try to have someone else administer that punishment. It appears to me that the only possibility of your breaking this fateful progression of events is for you to administer the punishment yourself. You probably realize the danger of trying that. But I can't see where you have any other choice."

"In other words, you feel that the only chance I have of preventing Tournay from killing me--is to kill him first?"

"Yes," Lima said. "Are you strong and hard enough to do it?"

Bennett thought for only a brief moment before he nodded. "I'm desperate enough, at any rate."

This time he did not leave immediately. He had to find out something first. He put his arms around Lima's shoulders and drew her toward him. She put her face up and he kissed her waiting lips. They were sweet and, if she did not return the ardor of his kiss, he did not notice it.

* * * * *

"Mr. Tournay is not in," the girl at the desk told Bennett. "You might try his home."

At a pay-booth in the lobby, Bennett called Tournay's home. The voice

that answered was that of a tired woman, one who has given up hope. "Mr. Tournay called me a short time ago and said that he would be in the office of a Mr. Leroy Bennett, in the Lowry building, if anyone called," the tired voice said.

Bennett hung up and caught a cab. His quarry had walked into an ideal place for their meeting. For better or for worse, he would soon bring this conflict to an end.

In his office, Bennett found that Tournay had been there and gone. He had left a message: "Tell Mr. Bennett that Lima sent me!"

So that was it--Lima had used Bennett as a dupe! He could not figure out her purpose, but he knew that he could never trust her again. She had been against him from the first. Perhaps even she, rather than Tournay, was the prime menace. He decided that he must kill them both, before they had the chance to kill him. Touching the small flat pistol snuggling in its shoulder holster, he knew the pursuit must continue immediately.

He rode the elevator to the ground floor, and he felt his mind working with a clarity and a precision which he had seldom experienced before. This time he knew he would win.

Shrewdly, before leaving the building, Bennett looked out through the glass pane in the door first. He waited only a moment before he saw the long gray sedan as he had expected. They would not trap him again. Ducking back, he walked rapidly toward a side exit.

Night had fallen by the time he reached the carnival building. He did not ring the bell. Instead, he walked to the rear, climbed the stairs of a fire-escape, and softly opened the window of a bedroom.

He stepped inside just as softly and stood listening for breathing. He heard none. This was probably too early for Lima to be in bed.

The bedroom door was open. Bennett could see a light coming from another part of the apartment--probably the living room. He paused to

steel himself for what he must do. The time had come when he would have to be savagely ruthless.

He found Lima sitting on a couch, reading a book. He suspected that she still had some control over his mind and he had no intention of letting her influence him. She must be killed before she could read his intention.

"It didn't work." Bennett spoke just loudly enough to startle Lima into raising her head.

As she looked up, he shot her squarely between the eyes.

In an agony of frustration, Bennett saw the flesh of her forehead remain clear and undisturbed. He knew he could not miss at this range, yet she was unhurt. He lowered his sights and shot at the white neck beneath the fair head. She still sat there, returning his gaze, unperturbed, unmarked by the bullets.

He pumped the four remaining bullets into her body. The only part of her that moved was her lips.

"It's no use, Leroy," she said. "Haven't you guessed? You are still in your dream. You can't kill me there."

Suddenly the implication struck him with its awful simplicity.

"Good God!" His voice rose. "Do you mean I've never been out of my dream?" He hesitated while the thought sank in. "My remembrance of coming out of it was only part of the dream itself," he murmured. "That was why you were able to turn time backward at will."

A cold calmness returned to him.

"Tell me," he said, "am I still in the dream?"

"Yes," Lima replied.

"Then I demand that you free me now!"

"As you wish," Lima said sadly. "And may God help you."

Bennett wrenched his body from the couch on which it lay and struggled to his feet. Though the dream had seemed real enough, he could look back on it now and see it as any other dream.

He breathed easier, and then stopped abruptly when he heard a voice behind him say, "You are still a dead man!"

Bennett whirled and found himself facing Tournay. And Tournay held a pistol aimed at his heart.

Bennett turned desperately back to Lima. His lips formed her name, but the sound died almost before it was uttered. This time, he saw, she would not help him. Her features had hardened and no mercy or compassion registered on them.

[Illustration]

"There is no escape," she said.

A fleeting thought went through his mind of springing at Tournay and trying to reach him before the gun could be fired. But one glance at Tournay's face made him realize how futile--and fatal--that would be.

Tournay's finger tightened on the trigger of his gun and Bennett thought ahead in despair to what was to come. One thing he knew: He did not want to die! Was there no way out?

The answer came like a cry of relief. There was a way--Thone! The city of his enigma. Tournay and Lima could not harm him there.

* * * * *

For just an instant, Bennett's vision blurred. Time paused, and the next moment he knew he had returned to Thone. The sounds of the alien

city floated up to him and he stirred.

He grasped the sides of his coffinlike bed with fingers that had lost their sense of touch. He pulled himself up to a sitting position and looked about him. On one side stood Lima, though now her features were not those of the implacable, merciless mystic, but rather those of a woman in love.

She smiled happily and said, "At last you have returned."

Bennett strove to move his tongue and lips to ask questions, but they refused, as though numbed by long inaction. He turned to his other side and gazed questioningly at the replica of Tournay who stood there.

Tournay's image spoke. "We had quite a time bringing you back, Sire. But now it has been accomplished--for good."

Striving to move his throat muscles, Bennett finally forced a sound, and then words, through his lips.

"Tell me," he pleaded. "Who are you? And, more important, who am I?"

He turned to Lima for an answer, realizing that now she would help him if anyone would.

"Doctor Tournay will explain it to you," Lima replied, indicating the dark man.

Imploringly, Bennett turned back to face Tournay.

"I see that very little of your memory has returned yet," Tournay said. "In a short while, everything--all your past--will come back to you. Until then, perhaps I had better explain to you who you are. My words will help trigger your returning memory, and speed up the process."

"Please do," Bennett begged.

"You are Benn Ett, _Le Roy_ of the city-state of Thone, in the year 4526 A. D. Six months ago, the strain of governing the city began to undermine your health. Acting under my advice, you decided to take a somno-rest cure.

"This rest cure," the doctor continued, "is quite standard practice in our time. We had a little difficulty bringing you out of it at the end of six months. Evidently your somno-existence must have been very pleasant."

"Do you mean that the existence I remember was merely an induced figment of my imagination?"

"Yes. You see, the best rest that can be given a mind is to give it not sleep, but pleasant work. Therefore, under my manipulation, you were given a pseudo-existence in a past era of history. You were led to conceive yourself as occupying a position, which, after close study, I deduced would be the most suitable and relaxing for you."

"But if that is true, why did my dream have to end so unpleasantly--I might say, so nearly fatally?" Bennett demanded.

"The more successful I am in choosing a pleasant existence for a patient in the somno, the more difficult it is to bring him out of it," the doctor replied. "Your unconscious mind, realizing how happy you were in your simulated existence, and how it would have to return to the rigor and stress which unnerved it before, fought with all its strength to remain where the somno had placed it.

"The usual practice in bringing a patient back to reality is for the doctor to enter the dream and convince him, by whatever means may be necessary, to return. Sometimes, however, the patient is so firmly tied to his somno-existence that drastic measures must be used. This is usually done by means of making the somno-existence so anxiety-producing that the patient is glad to return.

"Your particular release was one of the most difficult that I have

ever encountered. In fact, I was unable to bring you back myself, and asked your wife, Lima, to enter the somno with me and help force you to return."

Bits of recollection, which had been edging into Bennett's memory, burst through in full force, and he remembered. It was true. He _was_ Benn Ett, _Le Roy_ of the city-state of Thone.

He turned to Lima and, as he read the glad light in her eyes, he knew that she had witnessed the return of his complete memory.

"Welcome home," she said.

THE OLD MAN OF THE FIELD

by Mary E. Wilkins (Freeman)

From *Edgewater People* (Harper and Brothers; New York: 1918)

It was in February when Margy Ellerton, sitting at her book with Miss Lucretia Norris, her governess, looked out of the window and cried in dismay, "Oh, they are carrying poor old Mr. Rice away to the almshouse. Brother Tom told Aunt Sarah yesterday that they were thinking of it."

Miss Norris had sentiment. "Poor old Mr. Rice!" she said. "How he will miss his home!" Lucretia Norris said this, regardless of the fact that she knew perfectly well Old Man Rice would be much better off in the almshouse, that he had bibulous tendencies which would easily involve his setting himself and his house on fire any night and being reduced to ashes before succor could reach him. She knew, also, from trustworthy sources that his house was squalid beyond description. But she pictured poor old Rice confined in the almshouse, unable to prowl about fields and woods, which were as much his natural haunts as those of any aged wild four-footed creature.

Margy was inconsolable. She wept. "Poor old Mr. Rice!" she lamented. "He has brought me flowers from the swamp every spring since I can remember. I could never go for them myself because the swamp is so wet, and poor old Mr. Rice got his feet sopping wet."

"It was a wonder he did not have pneumonia," said Miss Norris.

"It was not so much the lovely things he brought, but he was so happy about it. It is wicked for people to take away an old man's happiness when it is a good happiness, like bringing wild flowers to me."

"You had better continue your lesson, dear," said Miss Norris, with a sigh. She was entirely of Margy's mind. Her heart ached when the poor-house wagon had passed. In that wagon on a bed of straw lay Old Man Rice, covered with old gaily colored quilts, which were violently tumultuous, though he was sick with grip. Lucretia Norris, as well as Margy, thought how pitiful it would be if the old man, after he had recovered, were to be kept in captivity. Old Man Rice, alien to the world at large, a gentle reprobate, harming himself to the extent of

his ability, and only harming his race by the mere fact of his being a derelict with whom collision would not result in disaster, only in annoyance, was, nevertheless, chosen comrade of Nature. Nature had her secrets all unveiled for Old Man Rice.

He knew that the shadows on the snow were of the loveliest blue; he knew that there were tints as of roses in grain-fields, and purple depths, like water depths, between ripening cornstalks. He knew where all the flowers lived and died and found resurrection. Old Man Rice was a constant visitor on resurrection days of flowers and wild fruits.

Sarah Edgewater came in, and Margy told her. Anything which disturbed her beloved niece Margy disturbed her. When young Doctor Tom Ellerton came home she consulted him.

"It does seem a shame," said Sarah; "they might have left that poor old man in peace. He did nobody any harm, and he did take so much comfort roaming the fields."

"Not much roaming to be done now," said Tom, glancing out of the window. The broad field was covered with high lights of snow patches.

"I know that," admitted Sarah; "but spring is coming, and I am not sure that even now that old man might not get comfort going about hunting for signs of it."

"He has a bad case of grip," Tom replied, pleasantly. Tom was always pleasant. "He would have died up there. Aunt Sarah, that shack is indescribable."

"Will they let him out after he has recovered?"

"I don't believe they will. The town authorities think he ought to be taken care of."

"Town authorities!" repeated Sarah, with high old head. "Town authorities have always simply made me sick. When that poor old man is over the grip he has a perfect right to come home. It is home to him. He is happy there."

"Well, Aunt Sarah," said Tom, "they will keep him away from rum, too."

"What of that?" inquired Sarah, with recklessness. "Oh yes, you can stare! Old Man Rice drinks no more rum than plenty of men who are not on the town, and when he drinks he always shows a great deal of sense. He carries it home and just stays in his house until he is over it."

Tom laughed a great laugh. "Aunt Sarah, you are shocking!" said he.

"I don't care, it's true," said Sarah.

"You can't deny," said Tom, "that there is great danger of the old man, during one of these sensible seclusions of his, setting his house on fire and being burned to ashes."

Sarah, as she grew old, had obstinacy which was unmovable. "We all have to die sometime," said she. "I say the town authorities have no right. Every human being should live just as he pleases as long as he harms nobody else. I believe in freedom. Besides, Margy is worrying herself sick over it," said she.

That afternoon Sarah and Miss Norris and Margy went to the almshouse to inquire for poor Old Man Rice. As they stopped before the building they distinctly heard him, for there was an upper window open. He was lamenting his fate. Now and then he coughed hoarsely. Then the wailing voice recommenced.

"Let me go home," was the burden of his tale. "I tell ye, I am going home. This is a free country. The Edgewaters let me squat on their field twenty-odd year ago, and I've got a right there. I tell ye I'm goin' home!"

Sarah hitched the bay mare and covered her. She then left Margy and Miss Norris in the sleigh while she entered the almshouse for a talk with the matron. When she reappeared the matron, a large, very good-natured-looking woman, was with her.

"You will find that what I say is true," she said to Sarah, "if you go there and look."

"Won't they let him out?" Margy inquired, anxiously, as they drove away.

"No, Margy, they will not," replied her aunt. "And he is not fit to go now. He has considerable temperature, and —" Sarah hesitated. The matron of the almshouse had told her what were wellnigh unspeakable things for a New England housekeeper to mention. She repeated things in horrified whispers. Miss Norris shivered disgustedly, but Margy looked straight ahead with brave eyes of disbelief.

"I don't believe one word of it. They just don't want to let him go," said she, with fine disregard of the utter lack of benefit which Old Man Rice could confer to make his presence so desired, even in an almshouse.

"I asked Mrs. White," Sarah continued, "if she thought, when he got better and spring came, they would allow him to roam about the woods and fields, as he has always been accustomed to do, and she said that if Mr. Rice got well enough to tramp, he would have to work."

"He won't like to work in the house," lamented Margy. "He wants to pick flowers and wild berries!"

"Well, maybe they will let him," soothed her aunt.

But Margy wept. Then suddenly she sat up straight, and her mouth tightened. "They shall not keep him," she said to herself. There was much of her aunt Sarah in Margy. She felt entirely able to cope successfully with the town authorities.

Later, Margy, seated beside Miss Norris, working on a centerpiece with daisies in white silk, reflected. She had an odd little smile which made her childish face inscrutable. Margy was becoming pretty as rapidly as possible, considering the disadvantages of growth with its accompaniments of too much length in one place, and too little girth in another. Her face was already charming. She resembled her aunt Sarah, but with the delicacy and tender, appealing fragility of extreme youth. She had Sarah's coloring; her brilliant red and white, her massy darkness of hair and soft intensity of eyes which looked back under black brows. Margy wore a gown of blue wool, however, which insisted upon the blue of her eyes, and her hair was tied with wide blue ribbon in a great bow

over her left ear.

The two little sisters next to Margy, Violetta and Imogen, were twelve and eleven years old, respectively, and so nearly of a size that they were often taken for twins. Following a fancy of their mother, Laura Ellerton, who lay peacefully helpless in her pretty room up-stairs, they had always dressed alike. Both wore brown frocks, brown boots, and brown hair-ribbons. As they were pink-cheeked, golden-haired little girls, the brown suited them. They sat side by side, reading out of one book. They read at exactly the same rate of speed, and each was ready to turn a page at the same second. They agreed about many things, but Violetta had the stronger character of the two; in fact, she was possessed of a strangely adventurous spirit. It was at this adventurous little girl that Margy stole glances, reflective glances, as they all sat together that night in February after the ride to the almshouse. Margy pinned considerable faith on Violetta for assistance in her plans for the release, a little later on, of Old Man Rice.

She was obliged to wait until Saturday morning. Saturday was a fine day, warm for the season. The snow was melting and everywhere ran tiny brown rivulets. Once Margy, walking with Violetta to the post-office, thought she heard a bluebird, but Violetta insisted that it was a crow, and Margy, who had her mind intent upon more important things, yielded.

"Let it be a crow," said she.

"It was a crow," said Violetta. Violetta, in her usual brown, walked along on thin brown-stockinged legs with a little hopping gait. Margy, clad in dark blue, walked at her side with a long graceful stride like her aunt Sarah's.

"You feel with me that it must be done," said Margy.

"Of course," responded the hopping Violetta, briskly, "it must be done. Poor old Mr. Rice must be taken away from that awful place. But I don't see how we can do much just yet."

Margy frowned reflectively. "I don't," said she. "I know Jacky Widner will help, but — that house of Mr. Rice's has to be cleaned, and we can't do that until it is a little later."

"It is real warm to-day," said Violetta, gazing at the brown rivulets — the earth seemed all in sinuous motion with them. "If March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb, then we can clean the house. While March is going out like a lamb, you know, Margy."

Then they reached the post-office, and Jacky Widner stood in the doorway.

"Hullo, Jacky!" said Violetta.

"Hullo!" returned Jacky. He took off his cap and said good-morning to Margy. He and Margy had passed beyond the childish halloos of greeting, although they were still children together.

"Jacky," whispered Violetta, "walk along a little way with Margy and me. We want to tell you something."

Jacky obeyed. He was a charming boy. He had curly hair, and, close-cropped though it was, the curliness showed. His head looked like a moiré pattern done in shades of brown. He had a ready, good-natured laugh, but his eyes were keen and steady, of a lighter blue than Margy's. The three walked on. They talked of Old Man Rice. Jacky agreed to do his part.

"When March is going out like a lamb," said Violetta, "we will clean poor old Mr. Rice's house. I will steal soap and rags and kettles and things. We will get them all there gradually. Then we will watch our chance."

"I can get a broom up there, all right," said Jacky.

"We will set a day for it when nobody is likely to interfere," said Margy.

"When March is going out like a lamb," said Violetta, "Margy and I will have it all planned, and you will do the work we can't, Jacky."

"Of course," said Jacky.

There came a Saturday, when March was certainly going out like the mildest of lambs, when Violetta by a subtle course of hints had instigated Imogen to beg

to be taken to Boston and Sarah Edgewater had yielded to the request for a holiday. Sarah with Imogen and Lucretia Norris started on the nine-o'clock train. Mrs. Ellerton's room was on the other side of the house, and Saturday was always a busy day with the nurse, Susan Bellows, who, moreover, was not curious, nor given to looking out of windows. Doctor Tom Ellerton had some out-of-town calls to make, and the coast was entirely clear. Jacky Widner, Margy, and Violetta streaked across the field with pails, soap, rags, and broom.

The three reached the little dingy hut in the midst of the yellow-green field. The snow had all gone, and the grass was spongy and deepening in color. A bluebird flew out of the distance and perched on a bit of broken fence. Spring was at hand.

"I heard frogs last night," said Jacky Widner.

He held the broom over his shoulder like a bayonet. He looked brave, but in spirit was bewildered. How was a boy to clean a house? Margy and Violetta, although they concealed it, felt a bit of dismay before that tightly closed little shack.

Jacky tried the door. It was locked. He took, with an air of importance, a large ring strung with keys. He had brought them from home. He tried key after key; not one fitted Old Man Rice's lock. "I'll have to get in a window," said he. The windows were fastened in the primitive fashion with sticks under the lower sashes. Jacky had finally to break a pane of glass in order to obtain entrance. "I can get another pane and some putty and fix it myself," he observed, as the glass shivered.

Margy looked resolute, but a little startled. Violetta realized delicious thrills of heretofore ungratified daring. She pressed forward eagerly to enter after Jacky, but he called out to her.

"You two keep back a minute," said he. "I want to see how it is in here. There may be mice."

"Huh! I am not afraid of mice," cried Violetta, but she realized Jacky as a boy on the highroad to manhood.

There were only three windows in the little building. The other two were flung up with vehemence. Jacky appeared, looking out of the one by which he had entered.

"You wait till a little fresh air gets in here," he commanded.

Old Man Rice's house, after being hermetically closed for weeks, was not a bower of roses. Jacky, when he threw open the windows, admitted a flood of warm, damp air, and there was a conflict with the terribly stale atmosphere of the interior. Jacky leaned out of the window, panting.

"Let me go in," urged Violetta.

"You wait, you and Margy," said Jacky. "It's pretty close in here." His face began to look a little sick.

It was, in fact, pretty close when at last the two girls had clambered in and stood with the boy surveying things. It was also very, very dirty, and disorderly to a degree which none of them had dreamed disorder could reach.

"Some tramp must have got in here and used poor old Mr. Rice's things," half sobbed Margy.

"It was the way he lived," declared Violetta, with cruel firmness. "Mr. Rice is very untidy."

Untidy was a mild expression for the condition of that one room which had meant home for years to the old man. It did not resemble a human habitation. It was the degeneration of civilization; it was organism rent to its essential elements. The three stared. To the girls it was a hideous nightmare. The boy whistled. Margy pointed to one corner.

"His bed," she whispered.

Violetta pointed. "The stove where he cooked," said she.

"What is that over there?" queried Margy. She had one hand thrust through Jacky Widner's arm.

Jacky whistled. Suddenly he faced the situation. "Now look here, girls," he said, "it is an awful mess; not much worse than we ought to have expected, I suppose. No use for us to stand here staring. If we have come to clean up, we must begin."

Violetta grew alert. "I say so, too," she agreed. "Margy Ellerton, you look scared to death. What's a little dirt? We must begin right away."

Margy straightened herself. She remembered that she had organized this plan, and it was not for her to show the white feather. "The first thing to do," said she, "is to make a fire in that stove so we can heat water. Jacky can bring some water from the spring, and there is the clean kettle we brought."

Violetta eyed the stove. "It has three legs," said she. "It is tipped way over to one side."

Margy regarded them with the scorn of the instinctive New England housewife, fertile in expedients. "Neither of you see what he did," said she. "I don't call you very smart. He used a brick for the leg that is gone. There is the brick," she pointed.

Jacky whistled. He made for the brick in the mass of rubbish, and with the aid of the girls had the stove securely established. "Now I'll start a fire," he said. "Then I'll fill the kettle."

Margy, with set lips, had begun work. She wished she had brought gloves, but she handled things without a murmur.

Violetta was more outspoken. "I wish I had tongs," said she. She stood with protruding lips. Then she made a dash out of the window. "I am going for some tongs," she cried, and fled across the field. Jacky set his kettle on the stove, which was beginning to fill the place with fervent heat, and settled down beside Margy in her corner.

"There's 'most everything here," he remarked. "I wonder where he got such a collection."

"I think people must have given him things," said Margy. "Here are two old flour-sifters, and three teakettles with holes in the bottoms, and a lot of broken cups, and a bird-cage." Margy held up a battered object and regarded it wonderingly. "I don't see why anybody ever did give him this," said she.

"What is it?"

"It is an old lady's bonnet. I do think it is awful, Jacky."

Violetta rushed in and snatched with the tongs the forlorn thing streaming with black ribbons. "For goodness' sake, Margy Ellerton, don't touch with your hands such terrible things!" said she.

"I know what I think," said Jacky. "Old Man Rice is a sort of old crow. I think he just kept everything."

Margy stared pitifully at Jacky. "If that is so," said she, "we may be very cruel, Jacky."

"Why?"

"All these things may mean a great deal to poor old Mr. Rice. They may mean to him what riches mean to men. They are his only possessions on earth."

Violetta was back. "Now, don't be silly, Margy," said she. "Possessions like these aren't good for anybody. We simply must clean up this place if we are to have that poor old man back."

Jacky arose. He looked resolute. "Margy, you climb out of that window," he ordered.

"What are you going to do?"

"The only thing that can be done. Go outside, and stand away from the door. I am going to force the lock with this old file."

Margy clambered out of the window. The door was soon flung open with a crash. Then before Jacky, vigorously wielding the broom, came flying out poor

Old Man Rice's hoard.

Violetta shouted her approbation. "It is the very best way," she proclaimed.

Margy, with her mouth set, stood at one side, watching. Hers was a firm, yet enormously tender heart of a little woman. What all these useless, frightful things might mean to him! With no experience of life in its entirety, she realized the tragic truth that even despicable possessions are part of the nature of a man, and derive from it a species of sanctity.

"You needn't look so solemn, Margy," said Violetta. "It is dreadful rubbish."

Margy nodded with grim, sad acquiescence.

At last Jacky had cleared the house except for a lounge tipping drunkenly against the wall, one chair which had lost half its back, one old arm-chair, a table, and the stove. Jacky, Margy, and Violetta gazed at the accumulated mass. "We can't burn it. A lot of it won't burn," said Violetta.

"We must," said Margy, in a tragic voice, "bury it."

"I'll run and get our shovel and spade," cried Violetta. "They are in the woodshed."

Jacky regarded Margy with a certain wonder mixed with admiration and sympathy. He did not fully understand, but he respected the strange workings of her girl-heart. "Old Man Rice can't really care for all this truck, you know," he said.

"He does," said Margy, "but he can't have it." She looked away.

Jacky glanced at her, and said no more. He moved about, whistling. Violetta returned with the shovel and spade trundled in a wheelbarrow.

After that short work was made of Old Man Rice's property. It was taken in wheelbarrow-loads to a soft place in the meadow behind the field. Jacky and Margy and Violetta worked, and there was a queer grave filled with the absurd earthly riches of a poor old man. Then they returned to the house. Even then,

entering from the fresh air, they sniffed unhappily.

"Don't believe we can ever get this place real clean," said Violetta.

The kettle was boiling. They set to work. They scrubbed. The little place grew hotter and hotter. The task became harder.

"It is no use," said Jacky. "I am awfully sorry, Margy, but the place will never be fit to live in."

Margy was pale. She stood silently gazing at the poor little house, the home-nest of a solitary human being which they had despoiled and not bettered.

"Don't feel so bad, Margy," said Jacky. "You have done all you could."

"I wonder if — fumigation —" said Margy.

Jacky brightened. "The house is very tight. That might do. They say it kills all germs," he said.

"Let's fumigate it," cried Violetta, with glee. "Let's fumigate it right away. It will be lots of fun."

"You can't," replied Jacky; "you haven't got the stuff to do it with. We shall have to wait."

"I don't believe we can get a chance for three or four weeks," said Margy.

"Oh, well, the old man can't come home till the weather is more settled, anyway," said Jacky. "Come along, girls. I'll find out just how to fumigate, and we will do it the first chance we get. Then everything will be all right. I guess we had better burn up some of that furniture, though, right away!"

Jacky and the girls dragged the things out, and set them on fire in the meadow where it was damp and there was no danger of the grass catching. Then they went home. Margy was considerably cheered at the prospect of fumigation, but she was impatient.

It was the Saturday before the 1st of May before they got their second chance. The wide field was green and dotted with dandelions; the trees were casting their first shadows of the year. It was very warm, and the air was heavy with fragrance and thrilling with bird notes. Jacky and Margy and Violetta stopped every crack and cranny in the little house and fixed their fumigating apparatus. Then all three went out, closed the door, and settled down under a wild apple-tree. Suddenly Jacky exclaimed. "There's a good deal of smoke!" he cried.

"Wouldn't there be?" asked Margy. The smoke was pouring from the little house. It stood in a violet haze.

"I — don't know," Jacky returned, doubtfully.

Then there was a sudden leap of flame from the roof. Jacky seized the two girls by an arm of each, and they all ran into the woods. When they were under the trees, out of sight, they stopped and looked at one another with round eyes of dismay. Margy was pale.

"We have set poor old Mr. Rice's house on fire!" she gasped out.

It was quite true. They heard distinctly the fire-gong. Then they heard bells and shouts. Suddenly they lost all sense of personal fear and ran to the fire. When they reached it the field was swarming with people and more were coming on a run. The engine was playing. Mr. Rice's little house was burning. The roof fell in, and there was a long-drawn cry from the people. "A mighty good thing," Margy heard a man say to another, who nodded. She gazed at him, her little face piteous and panic-stricken, but he did not see her.

All about people were saying that it was a good thing the house had burned. Old Man Rice was well cared for in the almshouse. Now he could not return. "Not fit for rats to live in," the young people heard one woman say. She added that her husband had been one of the men who had carried Old Man Rice away, and she related boldly her information of conditions which the three had never openly told one another.

When Jacky, Margy, and Violetta went home across the field, poor Old Man Rice's house was simply a little bed of red coals, out of which rose a tiny blackened chimney. The three conferred as to what had better be done, with

the result that Jacky told his mother as soon as he reached home, and Margy and Violetta told their aunt Sarah and their older brother, Doctor Tom. They were in Doctor Tom's office, and he told them to go out for a minute. It was not long before he recalled them.

"If you had deliberately set the house on fire, I can't say what would have been done," Doctor Tom said; "but as it is now, your aunt and I both think you had much better keep your own counsel. I shall stop at Mrs. Widner's and tell her the same thing. I am going over there now. You all meant well. It was accidental, and it is not necessary to set the whole village talking. Say absolutely nothing to anybody, not even to your sisters. You, of course, would not trouble your mother with it, and it is not necessary to tell Miss Norris."

"I do not approve of secrecy, generally," said Miss Sarah Edgewater, "but there are times when secrecy is simply common-sense, and this is one of them. You both understand? Not a word about it!"

"Yes, Aunt Sarah," replied Violetta, who looked a little puzzled but not disturbed.

Margy was weeping. Sarah took her in her arms and smoothed back her brown hair.

"Don't worry," she whispered.

"Poor old Mr. Rice can't come back now," said Margy, with a little moan.

"Yes, he shall," promised Sarah. "I will have another nice little new house put right up for him, and you shall help furnish it."

Margy looked up, comforted.

"Jump into the car with your brother and have a little ride," said Sarah. "He is going over to Mrs. Widner's. Tell him I want him to bring home some asparagus for supper if he goes near the market in Barr-by-the-Sea."

Margy was hustled into her hat and coat and was off with Doctor Tom.

"Why don't you want us ever to tell, Aunt Sarah?" asked Violetta, with shrewd eyes on her aunt's face, after the others had gone.

"Because nobody would make trouble in the case of you three, but setting houses on fire is an offense against the law, unless it is proved accidental," replied Sarah, with some sharpness.

"Oh," said Violetta.

Presently she inquired, with a cheerfully speculative air, "Would they arrest us and put us in prison?"

"No," replied Sarah, "but it would all have to be proved, the accidental part, I mean, and it would be a great annoyance to us all; and now I want to hear no more about it. But I absolutely forbid you to attempt anything like fumigating again."

"Yes, Aunt Sarah," replied Violetta, but she still looked interested.

"If you ever speak of it to any human being you will be severely punished and sent away to school," said Sarah.

Violetta was intimidated. She had an unreasoning dread of being sent away to school. "I will never tell, Aunt Sarah, honest," she said, and at last was impressed.

That evening Margy had a long conference with her aunt Sarah and her brother Tom about the new house that was to be built for Old Man Rice. She earnestly suggested many things. Tom Ellerton was interested in spite of himself by Margy's earnestness and solicitude. There was to be a bedroom with bath in the new house. Tom chuckled, but agreed.

It was later than usual when Margy went to bed. Her room faced the field over which she had gone on her futile errand that day. It lay exposed to the full moonlight and seemed almost, to the girl's excited fancy, like a white sea. There was a slight mist rising from the moist earth overgrown with young herbage, and one could easily imagine slight undulations like that of water. It was a very beautiful night. Margy drew in a long breath and looked. Then she

went to bed. She had not been in bed long before an old man appeared, wavering along the wagon-track in the field.

Old Man Rice had fled from the almshouse. He had been treated kindly, too kindly. Now, when the new grass was springing lustily, and wonderful things were happening in woods, and meadow, and swamp-lands, things in which Old Man Rice was vitally interested, which, indeed, formed a part of his higher self, he had been kept indoors, scraping paper off walls of rooms which were to be renovated. The matron had been over-zealous. She had been afraid of his taking cold. He had not been put to the outdoor tasks of the town farm, which, homely as they were, would have better satisfied him. At last, with growing strength of mind, if not of body, Old Man Rice rebelled. He had risen, clothed himself by the light of the moon, stolen down-stairs, and had sped away toward his old home.

Old Man Rice had come of a good family. He had been well educated. Nobody, probably not even he, knew by what gradual steps of degeneration the old man of the present had been evolved from the young man of the past. In the almshouse he had sprung back, impelled by some subtle law of environment, to a being more like his old self. He had been living on charity, associated with paupers and degenerates, but the life had been an impulse to higher ground, and he had not drunk at all. Old Man Rice was very clean of body, well-shaven, and clean of soul, except for old memories, which hardly touched him, as he sped along. But the nearer he drew to his old haunts the more keenly a longing which had been subdued awoke. Poor Old Man Rice, well-nourished and free in the lovely night, had no need for that bottle which had been left in the little closet in his hut. When he had started he had thought of it not at all; but there was no living soul to welcome him in his squalid abode. He began, after he had traveled a way and his strength flagged, to think of the dreadful welcome in that bottle. He thought more and more of it. When he had reached home, he would find it. Then he would lie down upon his old lounge, molded to his body, and would be asleep. Next day, there would be the wide freedom of the fields and woods.

Old Man Rice reached the place where his home had been. The reek of smoke was in his nostrils. Before him glimmered with unholy light, beneath that celestial radiance of the sky, a dying bed of coals. He saw that his home was gone. He stood staring. He had not heard the fire alarm while he was engaged

at his dull task of scraping wall-paper. Nobody had told him, and he had not heard. Since his attack of the grip his hearing had not been perfect. To-night, however, he heard everything. He saw everything. Suddenly his old eyes saw beyond the range of human vision. He stared at the smoking ruin of his old squalid home and became self-hypnotized by the glare. He saw deep swamps where he had loved to wander, swamps in whose lush growth his feet sank with a splash and rise of water, swamps bordered with great bushes covered with racemes of delicate white flowers, so sweet that they made one drowsy, great bushes laden with berries with a blue bloom, which he gathered and carried to little Margy Ellerton, the little girl who looked in the unkempt face of the old man with loving eyes. He saw meadows covered with white strawberry blossoms; he saw them rosy with fruit for the loving little girl. He saw also in the swamps that orchid so delicately made that its vivid tints are dulled by its grace. He filled his old hands with the purple-pink clusters of arethusa, and was bound to the home of the little girl who loved them, and looked at him as she looked at them — the child who could look at a poor besotted old man as she looked at a flower. Then Old Man Rice saw the wild mushrooms whose secrets of poison and health he knew well. He saw great flaming wild lilies. He saw goldenrod, and asters, and then he was back in the track of the seasons, and there was a wild apple-tree in the back field whose blossoms were rose-pink, and he could break off great branches.

In reality he was there under the apple-tree at last. He had wandered away from the flaming spot where his home had been, and lay on the silver herbage under the apple-tree. It was in full bloom and he breathed in wonderful sweetness. In the daytime it hummed with bees, but now the bees were in hive. Old Man Rice heard the field-nocturne of insects and wakeful birds, little notes and wing-rustles, and the rustle of leaves. He lay there, and the premonition, that was conviction, of enormous joy about to come to him was over him, and untainted. His squalid possessions of earth had been cleaned by fire. Old Man Rice had never been cleaned as by fire. He felt strangely light of body. He had no regret for his home. He was sheltered by something beyond his farthest dreams of home. He considered, however, that he must presently stir himself and break off a blooming branch for the little girl, who would take it and look at him as if she loved him. Then he became aware that she was there. The young face was bending over him. The child — he always thought of her as the child — was bending over him, and he heard her saying so clearly that her voice woke like bell-chimes, that she had seen him from her window, that she had

looked out and seen him, and Brother Tom must do something, must give him something. Poor old Mr. Rice, his home was all burned down. Then she said something about a new one, which seemed to him a true saying. He tried then to rise, and break off the blooming branch, but young Doctor Tom made him lie still.

Tom Ellerton knelt beside him, and listened at his chest, while the old man lay peacefully, his silver-white face shining as if luminous up at the blooming maze overhead. There was a boy there, too. Jacky Widner had seen him pass his house and had followed him. Old Man Rice lay there with the child bending over him and gazing at him with her eyes of kindness, and the boy beside her, and the young doctor, who had no skill to compare with the ancient healing power of the earth, which was now being bestowed upon her erring, suffering, piteous son.

Tom shook his head. Margy sobbed softly. Old Man Rice heard her, and again tried to rise and break off that blooming branch above his head.

“Don’t, dear,” said Tom to Margy; “you will trouble him.”

Margy bent down, and her lips touched the cold, white forehead of the old man, and he smiled. He thought then that he had broken the blooming branch and given it to her. He passed, thinking so. The old man whose best life had been in the simple wilds of the countryside, whose despicable life had been in the squalid travesty on civilization, now burned away from him, and the earth lay white and silent in his fitting resting-place. The Old Man of the Field lay dead in the field, and he had died with the belief that he had broken and given that blooming branch of spring which tossed above him against the radiant sky, giving out fragrance like a triumphal song, to the child who had looked alike at him and it, and he had not died intestate of all beauty and wealth, after all.

THE BLOOD-RED ONE

By Maxwell Struthers Burt

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It was a February evening, so it seems, about five o'clock, and old Mr. Vandusen, having left his hat and ulster in the coatroom, had retraced his steps along the entrance hall of the St. Dunstan Club to the wide doorway that led into the first-floor library. He usually sought the library at this time of day; a little group of men, all of whom he knew well, were as a rule to be found there, and they were friendly, not overly argumentative, restful. Now he paused between the heavy portières, partly drawn aside, and peered for a moment into the room. The light from the hall behind him made a pool of faint illumination at his feet, but beyond that there was only a brown darkness, scented with the smell of books in leather bindings, in which the figures of several men, sprawled out in big chairs before the window, were faintly visible. The window itself, a square of blank fog-blurred dusk, served merely to heighten the obscurity. Mr. Vandusen, a small, plump shadow in the surrounding shadows, found an unoccupied chair and sank into it silently.

"And that's just it," said Maury suddenly, and as if he was picking up the threads of a conversation dropped but a moment before; "and that's just the point"—and his usually gentle voice was heavy with a didacticism unlike itself—"that affects most deeply a man of my temperament and generation. Nemesis—fate—whatever you choose to call it. The fear that perhaps it doesn't exist at all. That there is no such thing; or worse yet, that in some strange, monstrous way man has made[Pg 97] himself master of it—has no longer to fear it. And man isn't fit to be altogether master of anything as yet; he's still too much half devil, half ape. There's this damned choked feeling that the world's at loose ends. I don't know how to put it—as if, that is, we, with all the devilish new knowledge we've acquired within the past fifty years, the devilish new machines we've invented, have all at once become stronger than God; taken the final power out of the hands of the authority, whatever it is, toward which we used to look for a reckoning and balancing in the end, no matter what agony might lie between. Perhaps it's all right—I don't know. But it's an upsetting conclusion to ask a man of my generation offhandedly to accept. I was brought up—we all were—to believe in an ordered, if obscure, philosophical doctrine

that evil inevitably finds its own punishment, and now—!"

"But—" began Tomlinson.

Maury interrupted him. "Yes, yes," he said, "I know all that; I know what you are going to say. I am perfectly aware of the fact that the ways of Nemesis are supposed to be slow ways—exceedingly. I am aware of the fact that in the Christian doctrine the process is not usually completed until after death, but nowadays things are different. How, since all else moves so swiftly, can a just God afford any longer to be patient? Time has been obliterated in the last four years; space and centuries telescoped; the sufferings of a century compressed into a few cycles of months. No, there is something wrong, some break in the rhythm of the universe, or those grotesque ghouls who started the whole thing, those full-bodied, cold-blooded hangmen, who for forty years have been sitting back planning the future of men and women as they planned the cards of their sniggering skat games, would awake to a sun dripping blood." He paused for a moment. "And as for that psychiatric cripple, their mouthpiece," he concluded sombrely, "that maimed man who broods over battle-fields, he would find a creeping horror in his brain like death made visible."

"And you think he will not?"....

In the darkness Mr. Vandusen suddenly sat up very[Pg 98] straight and tried to pierce with his eyes the shadows to the right of him.

Again the chair creaked.

"And you think he will not?" asked the voice again.

The words fell one by one into the silence, like stones dropped into a pool by a precise hand. As the ripples of sound they created died away in the brown dusk, the room seemed for a moment to hold a hushed expectation that made ordinary quiet a matter of movement and sound. From the drab street outside the voice of a newsboy, strident and insistent, put a further edge to the sharp minute. "N'extra!" he shouted. "N'extra! 'Nother big raid on west'n front!"

It was Torrance who asked the question. "What—" he said. "But, but—why—!" And then his wheezing inarticulateness broke like a dislocated bellows.

Mr. Vandusen, leaning forward in his chair, did not realize at the time the unreasonableness of the sharp blaze of irritation that at the interruption burned within him. It was not until much later, indeed, that he realized other odd circumstances as well: Torrance's broken amazement, for instance; the silence of Maury, and Wheeler, and, above all, of Tomlinson. At the moment he realized nothing, except an intense curiosity to hear what the man who had just sat down next to him had to say. "An extraordinary voice! Altogether extraordinary! Like a bell, that is, if a bell could by any chance give a sense of an underlying humor." And yet, even considering all this, when one is old and has heard so many voices—But here he was quite rigid in the darkness. "Do be quiet!" he whispered sharply. "Can't we be quiet!"

"Thanks!" said the voice, with its cool, assured inflections. "There is nothing so very extraordinary. Men's brains are not unlike. Merely—shall I go on?"

And before Mr. Vandusen's hurried assent could be uttered, the quiet tones assumed the accent of narration. "Good," they said. "Very well, then. But first I must ask of you a large use of your imagination. I must ask you, for instance, to imagine a scene so utterly unlike this February night that your eyes will have to close themselves entirely to the present and open only to my words.[Pg 99] I must ask you to imagine a beech forest in early November; a beech forest dreaming beneath the still magic of warm, hazy days; days that come before the first sharp cold of winter. Will you imagine that?"

"Yes!" murmured Mr. Vandusen; and he noticed that the other men did not answer at all.

"The mild sunlight," continued the voice, "filters through the naked boughs and touches the smooth silver trunks and the moss about their feet with a misty gold as iridescent as the wings of dragonflies. And as far as you can see on every side stretch these silver boles, dusted with sunlight; in straight lines, in oblique columns, until the eye loses itself in the argent shadows of the distance.

"In the hidden open places, where the grass is still green toward its roots, wild swine come out of the woods and stare with small red eyes; but save for the crackling of the twigs beneath their feet it is very quiet. Marvellously so. Quiet

with the final hush of summer. Only rarely a breeze stirs the legions of the heaped-up gray leaves, and sometimes, but rarely, one hears far off the chattering of a squirrel. So!—that is my forest.

"Through it runs like a purple ribbon a smooth, well-kept road. And it, too, adds to the impression of stillness, as the untenanted handiwork of man always does. On the rolled, damp surface are the marks of the cloven feet of the swine.

"Now there is a snapping of dead wood, a rustling of leaves, and an immense tusker—a grizzled leader of a herd—comes ponderously through the sun-dappled aisles to the edge of the road. For a moment he stands there, secure and unperturbed, and then suddenly he throws up his head, his little eyes wide and startled, and, wheeling, charges back to where his satellites are browsing. There is a breathless scurrying of huge bodies; then utter silence again, except that far away a limb cracks. But only for a moment is the road deserted. It seems as if the shadow of the great tusker was still upon it when, beyond the bend, a horn, sweet as a hunting-horn, blows once, twice, ends in a fanfare of treble notes, and a long, gray motor-car sweeps into view, cutting the sunlight and the pooled shadow with its twinkling prow. Behind it[Pg 100] is another, and another, and another, until six in all are in sight; and as they flash past one has a glimpse, on the seats of the landaulets, of a number of men in long cloaks and helmets; big and little men; fat men and sharp-featured; elderly men and young men, and particularly of one man, in the second car from the front, who looks straight ahead of him and is not interested in the chatter of his companions. He is a stern man, rather terrible, and his face wears a curious pallor. On the crest of a wooded slope, a quarter of a mile away, the giant boar sniffs the odor of the gasoline and delicately wrinkles his nose.

"And this," said the voice, "this convoy of motor-cars, these horns, almost as gay as the hunting-horns of former days, was, as you have guessed, The Maimed Man—as you choose to call him—come back to a hunting-lodge to rest, to slip from his shoulders for a while, if he could, the sodden cloak he had been wearing for the past three years and as many months.

"It was dark when they came to the hunting-lodge, a long, two-storied building of white plaster and timber-work above. The sun had been gone a while beyond the low hills to the west, and in the open place where the house stood

only a remnant of the red dust of the sunset still floated in the pellucid air. Here the beeches gave way to solid ranks of pines and firs, and the evening sweetness of these fell upon the senses like the touch of cool water upon tired eyes. The headlights of the motor-cars cut wide arcs of blinding light in the gathering darkness. One by one the cars stopped before the entrance with throbbing engines and discharged their loads. The short flight of stairs became for a few minutes a swaying tableau of gray cloaks. There was a subdued ringing of spurs. The lamps from within the doorway touched the tips of the helmets so that they twinkled like little stars.

"The Maimed Man descended slowly and passed between his waiting suite. The scent of the pines had stirred his heart with memories. He was thinking of the last time he had been here, years before—well, not really so many years before, only four years, and yet it seemed like a recollection of his boyhood. He paused[Pg 101] inside the threshold to remove his cloak. A hand, with a curious lack of duplication to it, stretched itself forward. The Maimed Man turned abruptly to see a servant with one arm bowing toward him. For a moment he paused, and then:

"'You are wounded?' he asked, and, although nothing was further from his desire, his voice had in it a little rasping sound; anger it seemed, although it might very well have been fear.

"The man turned a brick-red. He had never quite been able to recover from the feeling that in some way to be crippled was a shameful thing. He had been very strong before.

"'At Liège, your Majesty,' he murmured. 'In the first year.'

"'Always the left arm,' said The Maimed Man. 'Always the left. It seems always so.' But now he was angry. He turned to one of his suite. 'Can I not escape such things even here?' he asked. He went up without further words to his rooms. From his study a long door of glass opened onto a balcony. He remembered the balcony well. He opened the door and stepped out. The twilight had gone now. The night was very still and touched with a hint of crispness. Stars were beginning to show themselves. The black pines that came down to the edge of the clearing were like a great hidden army."

There was a little pause.

"And so," said the voice, "I can come now almost at once to the first of the two incidents I wish to tell you. I choose only two because there is no need of more. Two will do. And I shall call the first 'The story of the leaves that marched.'

"The warm days still held, and at the hunting-lodge there was much planning to keep things moving and every one busy and content. But secret planning, you understand. The Maimed Man is not an easy person for whom to plan unless he thinks that he has the final decision himself. There were rides and drives and picnics and, in the afternoons, usually a long walk, in which the older and stouter members of the suite either stayed at home or else followed painfully in the rear of their more active[Pg 102] companions. The Maimed Man is a difficult person to keep up with; he walks very fast across country, swinging his stick, choosing, it would seem, the roughest ways. It is almost as if he wished to rid himself of others; and he is inordinately proud of his own activity. It was a curious sight to see his straggling attendants, spread out through the silver vistas of the beeches, like earnest trolls, all in one way or another bent upon a common end. And I suppose it was on account of this trick of The Maimed Man that one afternoon, toward dusk, he found himself almost completely alone, save for myself, who managed somehow to keep step, and a silent huntsman in gray who strode on ahead with the quiet, alert step of a wild animal.

"It was very still. There was no breeze at all. Not a sound except the sound of the dead leaves beneath our feet; and The Maimed Man was not, as was his usual wont, talking. Indeed, he seemed very preoccupied, almost morosely so. Every now and then he cut with his stick at a bush or a yellowed fern as he passed. Presently the trees opened upon a little glade swimming in sunlight. And then there was a brook to cross, and beyond that a gentle slope before the trees began again. The sunlight was pleasantly warm after the coolness of the forest, and the slope, with its soft dried grass, seemed an inviting place to rest. The Maimed Man continued until he had reached the farther belt of trees, and then he turned about and faced the sinking sun, that by now was changing itself into a nebulous radiance on the horizon. The forest stretched in gentle billows as far as the eye could see.

"'We will stop here,' said The Maimed Man, 'until the others catch up. Lazy-bones! If they had one-half the work to do that my poorest man has to the

south they would not lose their legs so readily.' Then he sat down and lit a cigarette. I sat beside him. Farther up on the slope, in the shadow of the trees, sat the huntsman. We waited. The sun burned away its quivering aura and began to sink blood-red below the hills. Long shadows fell, penetrated with the dancing flecks of twilight.

"'Here they come!' said The Maimed Man suddenly. 'I see gray moving. There—below there, amongst the[Pg 103] trees!' He pointed with his cane. Far back in the secret aisles of the forest across the brook there did indeed seem to be a movement. The Maimed Man half arose to his feet. 'I will shame them, the lazy-bones,' he said, and then he sat down again, with an odd, soft collapse.

"For, you see, it was very still, as I have said. Not a trace of wind. The forest seemed to be slumbering. And yet there had come out of it, and across the open place, and up the slope, so that it touched the hair and chilled the cheek, something that was not wind and yet was like it. A little clammy cat's-paw. So! And then was gone. And on its heels came the leaves. Yes, millions of them. But not blown; not hurriedly. Very hesitatingly; as if by their own volition. One might have said that they oozed with a monstrous slowness out from between the crepuscular tree-trunks and across the open space toward the brook. Gray leaves, creeping forward with a curious dogged languor. And when they came to the brook they paused on its farther edge and stopped, and the ones behind came pushing up to them. And looking down upon them, they might have been the backs of wounded men in gray, dragging themselves on their knees to water....

"I don't know how long this moment lasted—minutes perhaps; perhaps no longer than the drawing in and letting out of a breath. It was broken by the figure of a man—an upstanding man, this time—who stepped out of the forest opposite and, halting for a moment on the edge of the clearing, looked up to where The Maimed Man was sitting. Then he signalled to some one behind him, and presently one by one the figures of the belated suite appeared. They formed themselves in a little group and with some precision marched across the clearing. As they trampled upon the stricken leaves by the brookside the fixed stare in The Maimed Man's eyes faded, and he watched them with a rigid attention. Shortly they came to where he had got to his feet. A huge elderly man with a red face led them.

"But your Majesty," he objected, "it is not fitting. You should not leave us in this way. Even here, is it altogether safe?"[Pg 104]

"The Maimed Man did not answer. Covertly and with a sly shamefacedness, unlike himself, he was trying to read the expression in the huntsman's face. But that faithful fellow's eyes were bland. There was no sign that he had seen anything out of the ordinary....

"There is no need," said the voice, "for delay. From this to the second incident I would describe to you is only a step. I shall not go into details. For these I can safely trust to your imaginations. And yet I would not, of course, have you gather that what I have just told you is without background—was out of a clear sky. Naturally, it was not; it was a cumulation, an apex. Such things do not happen altogether suddenly. There is a nibbling away at the banks, a little rivulet here and there, and then, all at once, a torrent like a hunted river under the moon. I called the first apex 'The story of the leaves that marched'; I shall call the second 'The mist that came up suddenly.'

"Two weeks had passed; quiet days, slow weeks, quiet and slow as the sunlight through the trees. The two doctors at the hunting-lodge, round, sharp-spoken men, with big, near-sighted spectacles, rubbed their hands together and nodded with certainty when they held their daily consultations. 'He is improving rapidly,' they said. 'The lines in his face are going. A little more exercise, a little more diversion—so!' They imagined crosses on their chests.

"Have you ever known mist on a moonlight night in a forest? Not a woods, not an open country with timber scattered through it, but a real forest; so limitless, so close-pressing, that one has the same sense of diminished personality and at the same time the same sense of all obstructions cleared away between oneself and the loneliness of the universe that one has at sea. As if, that is, you found yourself, a mere shadow in the darkness, kneeling close before an altar on which blazed, so that you could not altogether raise your head, the magnificence of a star. But mist in a moonlight forest is even more disembodied than mist on a moonlight sea. There are the dark masses of the trees, showing every now and then above the changing wraiths of white, and the summits of half-seen hills,[Pg 105] to give an impression of a horizon near yet seemingly unattainable.

"They had finished supper in the great oak-ceilinged room down below, where a fire burned in the stone embrasure, and the soft lights of candles in silver candelabra made only more tenebrous the darkness overhead. The Maimed Man leaned back in his chair and peered with narrowed eyelids through the smoke of his cigar at the long table stretching away from him. For a moment he felt reassured; a hint of the old assurance that had once been one of his greatest gifts. It was partly a physical thing, stirring in his veins like the cool blood that follows the awakening from healthy sleep. The sight of all these friends of his, these followers of his, with their keen, sunburnt faces, or their wrinkled and wise ones—! Surely he occupied a position almost unassailable; almost as unassailable as that of the God of Force whose purposes of late had at times puzzled him in a new and disturbing way—. What nonsense! He gripped power as securely as he could grip, if he wished, his sword. What strength in heaven or earth could break a man's will, provided that will had been sufficiently trained? He felt pleasantly tired from the walk of the afternoon; he thought that he would go up to his rooms for a while, perhaps write a personal letter or two, afterward come down again for a game of cards. He stood up; the long double lines of men at the table rose with him, as a unit, at attention. The Maimed Man looked at them for a prolonged second, his heart stirred with pride; then he wheeled about and departed.

"In his workroom above, two secretaries were writing at a table under the rays of a green-shaded lamp. They jumped to their feet as he entered, but he waved them aside.

"I shall return in a moment,' he said. 'First I wish to finish my cigar.'

"He opened the glass door onto the balcony, but, as it was cool, he stepped back and asked for his military cloak. When this was adjusted, he stepped once more into the moonlight.... And then, suddenly, there was no moonlight at all, or just the faintest glimmer of it, like light[Pg 106] seen through milky water. Instead, he had stepped into a swirling vapor that in an instant lost him completely from the door he had just left; a maelstrom of fog, that choked him, half blinded him, twisted about him like wet, coiling ropes, and in a dreadful moment he saw that through the fog were thrust out toward him arms of a famine thinness, the extended fingers of which groped at his throat, were obliterated by the fog, groped once more with a searching intentness.

"God!" said The Maimed Man. "God!"—and fought drunkenly for the wall behind him. His hands touched nothing. He did not even know in which direction the wall lay. He dreaded to move, for it seemed as if there was no longer a railing to save him from falling. There was no solidity anywhere. The world had become a thing of hideous flux, unstable as when first it was made. Gelid fingers, farther reaching than the rest, touched the back of his neck. He gave a hoarse, strangled cry and reeled forward, and fell across the balustrade that came up out of the mist to meet him. And slowly the mist retreated; down from the balcony and across the open place beneath. A narrow line of dew-brightened grass appeared and grew wider. The tops of the trees began to show. But The Maimed Man could not take his eyes off the mist, for it seemed to him that the open place was filled with the despairing arms of women and of children, and that through the shifting whiteness gleamed the whiteness of their serried faces. Behind him was the warm glow of the room, shining through the glass doors. But he did not dare go in as yet; it was necessary first to control the little flecks of foam that despite his endeavor still wet his lips. For you see," said the voice, and in the darkness its accents took on a slow, rhythmical sombreness, like the swish of a sword in a shuttered room, "this was far worse than the leaves. For, after all, the dead are only the dead, but to the living there is no end."

At least a minute—fully a minute—must have passed, a minute in which the brown shadows of the library, held back for now this long while by the weaving magic of the voice, stepped forward once more into their places, while Mr. Vandusen waited for the voice to continue. Then[Pg 107] the spell broke like a shattered globe, and, with a sudden realization of many things, he leaned forward and felt the chair to the right of him. There was no one there. He paused with his hand still on the leather seat. "Would you mind telling me," he asked, and he found that he was speaking with some effort and with great precision, "if any of you know the gentleman who has just left?"

"Left?" said Tomlinson sharply.

"Yes—left."

Tomlinson's voice was incredulous. "But he couldn't have," he insisted. "From where I am sitting I would have seen him as he reached the door. Although, if he really is gone, I can say, thank the Lord, that I think he's a faker."

On silent feet young Wheeler had departed for the hall. Now he returned. "It may interest you to know," he said, "that I have just interviewed the doorman and the boy who is stationed at the steps leading back, and they both say no one has come in or out in the last half-hour."

Suddenly his careful voice rose to a high note. "What the devil—!" he sputtered. He strode over to the electric switch. "For Heaven's sake, let's have some light," he said. "Why do we always insist upon sitting in this confounded darkness?"

THE CAVERN WORLD

by James P. Olsen

from *Astounding Stories of Super-Science*, June, 1930

EBook #29848

A great oil field had gone dry--and Asher, trapped far under the earth among the revolting Petrolia, learns why.

"Impossible! What sort of creatures would they be, that could live two miles beneath the surface of the earth? Surely, Asher, you are joking!"

R. Briggs Johns, mighty power back of Stan-America Oil Corporation, looked at Blaine Asher closely, expecting to see the chief geologist and scientist of the company laugh. But Blaine Asher did not laugh. Serious, his rather thin face grave at he leaned his tall, muscular body above a torsion machine he was adjusting, there was nothing to indicate he had the faintest idea of a joke.

"Why damn it, Asher!" Johns insisted wrathfully, "you don't really mean that. And"--he took a nervous turn around the laboratory--"if such a wild thing were possible, what has that to do with our trouble? You haven't led me on to spend a million dollars drilling a thirty-six-inch hole, just so you could test a fantastic theory?"

"You know better than that." Asher wiped his hands and leaned against a table. Johns, looking into the cool gray eyes of the man before him, did know better. Blaine Asher was more than just a geologist or scientist. Well he might be termed a master geo-metallurgist. Johns nodded, wiping beads of perspiration from his brow.

"You say impossible--and want to know how those creatures cause this field, the largest oil field in the world, to start going bone dry over night. All right:

"Remember how you laughed when I told you that oil would some day be

mined instead of pumped or flowed from the earth? You couldn't see how one central shaft could be sunk, then tunnels run back underneath the oil strata, tapping the sand from the bottom and letting the oil run down to be pumped out one shaft. Yet, that way, we would get all the oil, instead of the possible one-eighth of the total amount as we get by present methods.

"Now, you have seen that done. And you said that was impossible."

* * * * *

"Yes," Johns objected, "but those test wells we mined were only a few hundred feet deep. Wells in this field are eight thousand feet deep! Think of the heat, man! You can't do it. And as for people--"

"Your great field has suddenly gone dry, almost in a month's time," Asher stopped him. "What is happening here can happen elsewhere. Only, formations in this field are more suited to there being life--or something--below us. Stan-America is going broke. Many others have already gone broke. Still, that oil couldn't have gotten away.

"As for heat--yes, we know that oil is hot when it comes up from the oil sand at eight thousand feet, or from ordinary wells at three to six thousand feet. But"--Asher lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply--"gas coming out of the same well is cold! So cold it forms frost inches thick on pipes and tanks.

"Rock pressure--the pressure of the earth--forcing up the gas, causes that. Why couldn't that same pressure cool great caverns below the granite cap below the oil sands? It could. For that matter, I know that same pressure will generate useful power. I'll show you that in a minute."

"All right!" Johns chewed his cigar almost savagely. "Say, then, that you can work down there, nearly two miles underground; granted that we can tunnel from beneath the sands and pump more oil from one central shaft than we now do from fifty wells--what has that to do with this tosh about a race of people?"

"They are not people, perhaps." Asher grinned at the "there, I've stuck you!" look on Johns' face. "Let's say, rather, creatures. Have you ever met Lee Wong, the great Chinese scientist, or his Russian geological collaborator, Krenski? No?

* * * * *

"Well, I have. I met them in Paris in 1935--five years ago. They're brilliant men, and they've prepared some wonderful papers. Brilliant, I said: they are also dangerous. They claim, you know, that the fossils we now drill up come from a lost race--people who went _into_ the earth while man, like us, was coming up onto the earth from the water. Some claim those fossils have been on the surface at one time, and were silted over. But eight thousand feet is a lot of silt, Johns: ever thought of that?"

"Good God!" Johns gasped hoarsely. "You almost make me believe you are right. But, supposing there is such a race of things--what will you do?"

"This." Asher drew back a curtain that was stretched across one end of the laboratory. "You know I was working on a cage in which to descend into that eight-thousand-foot well you've drilled--the well you're going to use to try and find why this field is suddenly gone dry. This it it."

Johns stared, shook his head wonderingly and stared again. Before him, ready to be transported to the well that was larger than any ever drilled before, stood what Blaine Asher called his Miner, for want of a better name.

A thick steel tube, it was. Twelve feet long and large enough around that a man might stand inside of it. The top was welded on in much the manner a top is welded on an ordinary hot-water heater, and had connections for hose in it. At the height of a man's eyes heavy windows were set in, and in one side was a door just large enough to admit a man's body. This door sealed tight the minute it closed.

"It looks like--like some sort of a deep sea diving outfit," Johns said as he walked around the braces that held the Miner upright. "But all those gadgets inside and on the bottom--?" He indicated the strange instruments that could be seen when the door was opened, and the queer glass tubes that projected from the very bottom.

* * * * *

"Pressure-power units--my own invention," Asher told him. "For ten years I've been working on this. I knew that some day I would want to explore the oil caverns beneath the earth, so I made ready.

"As I told you, rock pressure, or earth pressure, is a tremendous thing. It is power, so I figured how to use it. Under artificial pressure, I have tried out my Miner and its equipment.

"Those tubes sticking from the bottom contain something you are familiar with: non-burning and non-explosive helium gas. I have discovered a way, by their use, to create power that will melt away rock or iron--literally dissolve it into nothing! Not in an hour, or minutes. In seconds, Johns!

"The pressure of the earth acts as my generator. The pressure action on the filaments of platinum, and several compositions I have no time to explain now, causes heat. Call it friction of compressed air, if you wish. As neon gases carry an electric spark, so does this helium carry the power generated by earth pressure. The pressure below earth acts on the delicate coils and points of my generator. This bit of power is carried into the helium tubes, and by a system of vacuum power, is increased millions of times. Thus, the tiny spark of a cigar lighter would electrocute a hundred men!"

"I--you mean somewhat like a violet ray is increased in the lightning tubes?" Johns strove to grasp the foundation of the thing.

"Yes, the foundation of it all--with the earth's pressure the power motive," Asher nodded. "So, after my Miner is on the bottom of our

well, I can burn--or dissolve--a room as large as this laboratory in a few minutes. The whole thing is no mystery after you learn it--not nearly so much as radium, or radio, was. Merely creating a spark of electricity and fanning it through a vacuum and a conductor of massed gases."

"But"--Johns had unconsciously dropped his voice to a whisper--"what of these strange creatures? How would you deal with them? Damn it, Asher, I think I'm beginning to believe this nutty idea of yours. Any man who can generate power with the pressure of air as it is packed by earth must know what he is talking about!"

"I have but one protection against anything down there that tries to harm me," Asher said simply. "That is this--see?"

* * * *

What he held up looked like an old-fashioned six shooter. It was fitted with a platinum-sealed box in the place where a cylinder would have been. The barrel looked like some queer, blue glass.

"Do you see that test tube?" Asher pointed to a glass tube on a table a few feet away. "Now watch."

He pressed a tiny ratchet under his thumb. A snapping, buzzing noise filled the laboratory. Johns gave an exclamation of wonder and awe. Quickly, the test tube started to melt into a pool of molten glass. Asher increased the pressure of his ratchet trigger. The tube was knocked to the floor.

"Static electricity--always some form of electricity," said Asher grinning at the astonished oil baron. "Conductor coils here," he continued as he tapped the sealed cylinder, "are charged much as a flash-lamp battery. The charged conductors attract the static electricity of the air, and, in a manner similar to the action of the power generator, increase power. There is a slight difference: by turning quick power on my static gun, I can cause the charge to knock down and merely electrocute, as I knocked the half-melted tube from

the table."

"I can understand that, a little," Johns sighed profoundly. "It's the same juice that causes a gasoline truck to catch fire if you don't have a ground chain on it somewhere. But, just the same, I claim it's remarkable."

"Not half as remarkable as what I expect to find two miles down when I descend to-morrow." Asher had a dreamy look in his eyes. "I wonder: new ways to get petroleum wealth ... a strange people...."

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"Men,"--Asher, a tight-fitting asbestos composition suit covering him from foot to neck, spoke tersely--"when you get me on bottom, stop every bit of machinery, and don't dare pull up until I give the signal. If I'm down there the entire day, all right. But"--he smiled, trying to make light of the danger--"if I don't signal within thirty-six hours, pull up anyhow."

From the bull-wheels of the drilling rig Asher spooled out some of the air-hose cable through which air blown over ice would be pumped into the Miner; then when the long steel cylinder was over the hole and ready, he turned to the company officials and government scientists and engineers around him in the boarded-up derrick.

"Possibly I can get a survey in an hour. Perhaps I'll have to come back to the surface and make adjustments to my equipment. That remains to be seen.... Now, let's get low."

He adjusted a helmet over his head. It looked much like the helmet worn by a sea diver, except that it had no connecting hose for air. The windows in the helmet, which contained pressure lights, worked on the same principle as the disintegrating rays of the Miner. When Asher turned the ratchet that set the little pressure machine into motion, a violet tinged green ray of great lighting power shot out and increased, by weight of air, or atmosphere beneath the earth, the power of one tiny spark a million times.

Without ceremony or farewell, Asher crawled inside his tube. The door was closed and he fastened it from inside. For a moment, wild panic assailed him. But he fought it off, becoming again less the feeling human and more the cold calculator of advanced science. The light from outside, coming in through the windows of the Miner, was shut off. The long steel cage clanked against the sides of the special casing in the well, and Blaine Asher was on his trip into a lower world never before visited by man.

That was what Asher believed. But, had he known what waited for him, two miles into the bowels of the earth....

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At five hundred feet, the descent stopped, giving him time to adjust himself to the pressure change. The gas and oil had been eased out of the hole. That is, the casing had been run on through the producing strata, shutting it off. Asher signaled by buzzer, and a stream of the ice-washed air flowed down to him.

Three thousand feet! Six thousand feet! More than a mile down! Sweat poured from his body in streams, and the air coming into the Miner through the hose did not relieve him. It was hot--almost unbearably so. His ears were roaring. The dark of his tube was relieved as he turned on his pressure lamps. He adjusted the pressure discs over his ears by twisting a thumbscrew on his helmet, and the pounding of his ear-drums ceased.

Gasping, he watched the depth meter in front of him. It did not seem as if he was moving, but the indicator now showed more than seven thousand feet. It moved around slowly and more slowly; trembled at eight thousand--and stopped.

Like the snapping of a man's fingers, the temperature inside the Miner changed. Asher was now fifty feet below the bottom of the oil and gas sands, and if his theory about rock pressure worked.... It _was_ working. Frost was forming on the inside of the Miner!

"I'm right--right--right!" Asher thought, elated, sending his buzzer signal up to those so far above. The icy air through his hose changed to air of normal temperature. He signaled for slack in the lowering cable, then prepared for the greatest test of all.

Cramped, with hardly room to move, he studied his gages. Helium tubes at the proper pressure for compressing the tiny spark of the pressure generator, so it would flare a million times stronger under the action of the vacuum tubes: diamond and cut-glass tubes in the bottom of the Miner, thermoed with layers of quicksilver: everything cleared, everything ready.

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His hand shaking, Asher pushed the tiny switch that brought his filament points trembling together under the atmospheric pressure so far underground. A tiny spark danced and throbbed through the tiny glass tube before him, beginning to buzz as it started the circuit of increasing coils, and soon humming and vibrating as the helium and vacuum tubes swelled it to full power. Spark after spark, increased almost beyond imagination, followed one after another. The Miner throbbed and shook.

White-faced, Asher touched the little lever that opened the blasting outlets in the bottom. Almost instantly the Miner dropped a full six inches--went on, down to a foot. Asher, pride of success choking him, pulled the lever hard over, which brought some of the tubes beneath him spreading out, to blast away the earth on each side of him.

He signaled for more and more slack as the depth indicator showed he had burned, or disintegrated, his way down to thirty feet beyond the original bottom of the hole. He was below the bottom of the protecting wall of casing now--at the mercy of the pressure of two miles of earth.

Slowly, setting all his bottom tubes to cutting away on all sides of him, he started hollowing out enough room to step out into. His

lights, when he looked through the windows, showed ghostly on earth ten feet on each side of him. Ten more minutes and he had created a room nearly twenty-five feet square--a man-made cave, two miles below the surface.

There was something akin to awe in the feelings of Asher when he opened the little door, crawled out and stood erect. The pressure lamps in his helmet lit up the room he had made. There were no sounds, just a vague, ringing silence.

Then so quickly that it robbed him of his senses, two things happened. A hundred yards away from the well in which he had descended, another well, drilled by another oil company, was shot. Three hundred quarts of nitro-glycerine were set off in the hole.

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Asher screamed and clamped his ear discs down tight. It seemed the very gods of thunder were shrieking and raging in his head; every nerve and fiber in his body throbbed and tingled with the hellish vibration.

On his knees, where the shock had thrown him, in darkness beyond description, Asher realized the lights from the Miner no longer shone out. Frantically, he adjusted the small lights in his helmet and got them to sending off their rays again. Then, an icy hand seemed to squeeze his heart, turning his blood to ice-water in his veins. He cursed himself for not foreseeing that some company might shoot a well close by, while he was underground.

He turned. The Miner was all right, but Blaine Asher was trapped! For the walls of the hole below the bottom of the casing had caved. Thirty feet of rock, sand and conglomerate matter were between him and the bottom of the pipe.

He was trapped--two miles below the earth. There was no hope of rescue, the hope that miners feel in deep shafts. There could be no rescue for Asher. No one could get to him. He cried out his horror,

fighting to keep from swooning.

The helmet hampered him. He turned on a small pressure lamp attached to the belt at his waist, and chanced taking the helmet off. Dank and nauseous was the air that he breathed, since it no longer came through the filters in his helmet. But it was air that would serve, nevertheless.

A crackling, rumbling sound caused him to turn quickly. Eyes wide, he stared at the long crack that was opening before him.

Asher was between two layers of granite--one layer under him, and another above him, just below the oil sands. Now, as the crack between these two layers widened, he could see it slope downward until it ended in a great cavern that stretched endlessly away beyond the beams of his light.

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It wasn't this crack that caused Blaine Asher, an iron-hearted man of science, to choke and sag down to a sitting position, his knees refusing to support him. No--it was the terrible, Godless, unbelievable Things that scurried around in the smooth rock hall that stretched away into the cavern.

Frozen with soul-chilling fear, Asher stared with eyes that bulged. What were they? Spawned neither of God nor Satan--what could they be? Black-skinned--or was it skin?--like rubber, with round bodies, like black basket balls inflated to triple size; bodies that seemed to ripple, distort, swell and contract with life within life.

Short, foot-long stems that must have been legs, ending in round balls that served as feet, no doubt. Tentacles, Asher would have called them, six feet in length, thick as mighty cables and dotted with suckers like the tentacles of an octopus. And heads--Asher gagged and vomited!

Not heads. Just masses of the black body substance as large as the two

fists of a man. In each head was a crooked black gash for a mouth. There were no eyes that Asher could see. Yet, these Things seemed to see one another, and emitted strange, chill, squeaking sounds!

As Asher watched, the Things sensed his presence. A half hundred of them rose and started toward him. They did not walk, nor did they crawl. Undulating, contorting strangely, they came on with incredible speed, long tentacles waving before them; slithering on the rocky floor of the cavern; making those odd squeaking noises.

As they neared him, Asher sprang to his feet, backing up against the pile of cavings beside the Miner. A long tentacle whipped out and wrapped around his leg. A short, snout-tentacle quivered toward his face. There was strength beyond imagining in the grip on him.

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With an almost animal snarl the man from the earth's surface moved to protect himself from these creatures, surely of the lowest living order. He grabbed into the pocket of his loose asbestos composition suit, and his fingers closed comfortingly around the static gun.

He aimed it, and the Thing gripping him was hurled back upon the others. Crackling, snapping viciously, the charges of electricity that were drawn from the very earth increased in the gun and spumed out like lightning bolts. The Things squeaked excitedly and surged forward. Asher's finger pulled the ratchet trigger full force, and like dew before a strong shaft of sunlight, the gruesome Things were knocked away.

Hating the sight, Asher changed the charge of his gun, cutting the size of the path the volts covered, thereby increasing the potency of the discharge. The piled bodies sizzled, and to Asher's nose came a sulphurous smell. Then, there was nothing at all....

Sick, he put the gun back into the deep pocket and leaned on the wall. He turned around again to the pile of cavings that barred his way from the surface, and dug like a madman with his bare hands. The Miner was

weighed down, and he could not use it anyhow. The blasting tubes were on the bottom, and could not be shifted to the top.

Suddenly he stopped his crazed work, raised his head and listened. "My God!" he gasped hoarsely, "am I stark mad?" He thought he must be, for the voice of a human being came to his ears.

"You will be pleased, Blaine Asher, to turn around! And do not make any foolish moves, I warn you."

"Lee Wong! Krenski!" Asher turned, face to face with the super-scientists of whom he had spoken to R. Briggs Johns the day before. Asher shook his head. More of the terrible dream, this meeting two humans down in the earth's core.

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"Most right, honorable Asher." Lee Wong bowed mockingly. He and Krenski were garbed in loose-fitting garments of much the same style as Asher. In their hands, they carried static guns. Not the small gun, such as Asher had concealed in his pocket. More like heavy air drills, they were.

Asher frowned at the lamps they carried. He knew by the dazzling action of the rays that they were pressure lamps. But they gave off much better light than those of his own invention. They had gone him one better there.

"Did--did you see them?" Asher gulped. "And how--how did you get down here? Tell me!" He took a step toward Lee Wong, intending to lay his hand on the Chinaman, to make sure he was live flesh and blood, and not a figment of his disordered brain.

"Stand where you are!" Lee Wong snapped. He held the heavy static gun up and Asher felt a light charge tingle his body. "Those Things of which you speak--I assume you mean the Petrolia. Ah, yes, we see them. Every day, we see them. For us they work. They work, my dear Blaine Asher, tapping upward into the oil sands; sands that are burial places

of countless millions of generations of Petrolia; of lost races that once ruled supreme over these underground worlds.

"How simple, to take the oil from below--the oil you want so much above. Someone must do the work. I and Krenski found the Petrolia ready and willing. Being creatures of feeling, with little sense, we were able to bend their dying wills to do our work. You see, we made them feel we would save them, a dying race, from extinction! They do our bidding."

Asher was bewildered by the enormity of the thing. "You mean these Things you have called Petrolia actually work for you? And that you saved them from becoming extinct?"

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"Exactly," Lee Wong nodded, seeming to be enjoying himself. "Like humans of the surface, Petrolia live on the dead. I mean, wherever we get our living food from the earth, we plant our dead back in that earth. Petrolia are spawned in beds of petroleum. Just as eels seek deep water to lay their eggs, so do Petrolia go to the oil strata to spawn future tribes.

"When we pump out the oil, they have no--shall we say 'hatching?'--beds. But now, by tapping and bringing down the oil, we have assured them more spawning pits. They will increase, and we have made them sense it. For that matter, the very oil they breed in, gives them sustenance. That is why they are black fleshed and blooded, and have suckers instead of mouths, as a black man is black through ages beneath hot suns.

"It's easy for us, who are wiser than other men, to figure what oilfield might contain such people. We have a rapid elevator connecting us to the surface. And--"

"Then," Asher almost shouted, "I'm not trapped!"

"No?" Lee Wong wrinkled his forehead quizzically. "You should realize

that we cannot allow you to go back to the surface--alive, or any other way. We intend to increase the Petrolia, spreading them to other underground, yet uninhabited worlds. You would spoil that.

"No, you will never return to the surface. They cannot haul your tube to the top, so they will think you perished in it. And"--Lee Wong shrugged--"it might have been better if you had, Mr.--"

"_I wouldn't!_" the yellow man snarled. He rolled the ratchet of his static gun and Asher was hurled to the floor by the heavy shock. Wisely, he stood up, keeping his hands well away from the pocket in which his own gun rested. He doubted whether his little static gun could compete with the guns of the others, but it was something. They had not thought to search him--perhaps they might not. It was his only hope.

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Lee Wong bowed low again, motioning Asher to go ahead. "Now you shall see what we have done. We are proud, and we know you can appreciate our workings. You will be glad to learn why we do as we are doing; you will be intrigued as a fellow scientist. Then, so sad to say, you must perish for having gained that very knowledge."

Asher shrugged, and through half-closed lids he eyed Lee Wong and the rather small, slender Krenski, of the high brow and large head. Then he walked ahead of them. Head up, shoulders back, he walked carelessly down the wide hall--a hall that led into the main cavern of that underground empire.

It was large--fully a hundred feet in a rough square. Not fifteen feet from floor to ceiling at any point, it followed the course of the two layers of granite between which it was sandwiched. Other long halls, or crevices, ran in every direction out of this main cavern. In the walls, in niches and cracks, the superior pressure lamps had been placed, throwing a bright, eery light over it all.

Asher recoiled suddenly at the sight of hundreds of Petrolia that

swarmed the hallways, and they seemed to sense another presence beside that of Lee Wong or Krenski. A choked, gurgling sound came from the Chinaman, and they disappeared down the halls, squeaking angrily as they went.

"Our control room," explained Lee Wong waving his hand about him. He pointed to a dozen twenty-four inch pipe-lines that ran along the low ceiling, coming from as many different halls into the room, but all going out the same large hall, larger than the rest. "There are the arteries of our system. There is the oil that is so--shall we say strangely?--missing in your wells." He smiled, a taunting, mocking light in his eyes.

"You well understand how we do it. Above us, just below the oil strata, is a steel, trough-shaped roof. The oil, tapped from below, drains into these, and then into these pipe-lines. If we were working from above, now, we would run it to a central shaft, and pump it out. We do not want it on the surface, however."

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"Then why in the name of hell do you want it?" Asher barked, a tense note of anger in his voice. "And what do you do with it?" These two were humans. At least, they were in man-form, if not in feeling. And the Petrolia could be handled. Asher was getting mad, and his fear ebbed.

"Come." Lee Wong led the way under the pipe-lines, down the large hall. Krenski, his heavy static gun ready, walked at Asher's back. They came out into another cavern that stretched beyond the powerful lights. The sound of their voices echoed like thunder of the drums of Thor, and Asher realized this cavern might stretch away in Stygian blackness for hundreds of miles.

Asher marveled, for the floor of this cavern dropped at least five feet below the level of the control room or incoming hallways, forming a natural reservoir. A reservoir for the big streams of oil that were pouring into it from the pipe-lines.

The rumble of the oil as it came in and splashed out in a never-ending stream, and the rumble of the oil streams above them as the precious fluid flowed down into the plated drain roof, sounded like the tramp of the weary feet of the damned, as it echoed back and forth across the mighty cavern.

"Our storage." Lee Wong stood at the edge and explained. "Also, as you may see, a concentration incubator, or spawning bed and food storage for our Petrolia."

Blaine Asher looked again at the rippling oil at his feet. He choked brokenly and stepped back a pace. For the oil near the bank was alive! It rippled and splashed, teeming with life. By the strange alchemy of breeding in oil and living on oil as man lives on bread, that lake of oil was a mass of growing Petrolia. Millions--yes, countless billions--of them! Hideous, foul Things that would be turned loose with the rest in that nightmare world--that would be taken to other buried worlds to start new races.

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"But why--why?" Asher almost screamed the words at Lee Wong.

"Petrolia will be our armies, protecting our underground wealth," Lee Wong answered him. "They will be our faithful workers, under no command but mine. For, even Krenski has not mastered the over-control it takes to handle them!"

"Gradually, as happened to the field we are now under, all oil fields will go dry. We will be getting the oil from below, and putting it in storage in mother earth. Think, Blaine Asher, what it will mean!" There was a fanatical light in Lee Wong's beady eyes.

"A world without petroleum is a world without power. No oil for fuel; no gasoline, lubricants or by-products of any sort. No airplanes could fly; tanks, tractors, oil-burning trains and ships; mechanical appliances--nothing could run. We now take the oil from America.

Later, when our Petrolia have increased and we have devised means of moving them, we will go to all oil-producing countries.

"We will secrete the oil and paralyze the world. Now, in Russia and China and India, our societies are organizing and growing. They will handle the weakened, powerless nations, and I shall be ruler of the universe, surface and beneath, with Krenski to aid me, you see. It is wonderful, is it not? And, knowing what you do, having seen what you have, could you call it impossible?"

Blaine Asher groaned. It was not impossible, he knew. Unreal; monstrous--but never impossible. A region of hideous Petrolia; a world stripped of automotive and mechanical power, its fuel held in the hands of a few, far underground--it was terrible to think of.

And Asher the only one who knew. The only one who could avert such a thing. The fate of an entire world was in his hands. And he would soon die.

Die? No! Blaine Asher swore silently to himself that no power in existence should keep him from destroying these two fiends. It had to be done!

He dared not fail.

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"Wonderful, stupendous thing," he forced himself to smile. "I'd like to grasp the hand of the genius who devised and carried out such a wonderful thing."

He took a step toward Lee Wong, right hand extended, his left slipping toward the pocket where his own static gun rested.

Lee Wong extended his own right hand. Something in the chill, flint look of Asher's eyes must have warned him. Even as Asher's fingers closed around his hand, he tried to jerk back.

"Destroy him!" he cried out to Krenski.

Asher dropped to one knee, letting his static gun remain in his pocket. His left hand closed around Lee Wong's wrist as the Oriental tried to pull away. Krenski was bringing the heavy, cylinderlike gun up and aiming it at Asher.

Asher twisted on one knee, his teeth gritted, braced to receive the shock from the gun. He jerked Lee Wong's arm down, heaved and came to his feet. Crying out, arms and legs flailing, the Chinaman catapulted toward Krenski--and just at the instant Krenski fired!

The sickening smell of cindered flesh was in Asher's nostrils as he turned and ran back up the main hallway. He glanced back over his shoulder as he ran, and shuddered at the black mass lying at Krenski's feet. Lee Wong was no more. Wide-eyed, the Russian stared at the thing at his feet. Then, with a fiendish shriek, turned and brought the gun into line on the fleeing Asher.

A crackling charge of electricity singed the back of Asher's head as he dove head first around the corner of the hall into the control cavern. He reasoned that Krenski had sent a full charge after him, and hope kindled higher in his breast. For Asher believed his smaller static weapon was as strong as that of the other. At that, it would be a test, and Asher dared not take chances.

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He crouched in the door of another hallway, waiting. Cursing, Krenski dashed into the control cavern. Asher brought his gun up and fired. But even as he pulled the trigger, a long tentacle reached from the dark crevice behind him and jerked his arm. His charge snapped by the Russian, warning the other that Asher, too, was dealing with powerful electric rays that meant death should they touch.

Asher yielded to the tug of the slimy, sulphur-smelling tentacle, letting it pull him into the crevice, the charges of Krenski's weapon crackling by him, leaving his skin dry, and a powdery sensation in his

mouth.

In the shelter of the crevice, Asher turned his gun upon the Petrolia that gripped him. The tentacles fell away, fading to nothingness before the charges that showed quivery blue in the dark. Like catacombs, one crevice opened into another. Asher darted into the next crevice and edged cautiously toward the control cavern.

The angry buzzing and snapping of Krenski's weapon caused him to duck instinctively, although no deadly charges came his way.

"Oh, God!" he heard the Russian's high-pitched voice, agonized, wailing, "they're coming in--they're coming in!"

A squeaking and slithering, now greater than ever, rose above all other sounds. And Asher realized what Krenski meant. Lee Wong had said that only he could control the Petrolia. They were swarming into the control room now. That was what Krenski was shooting at.

The squeaking sounds came up the crevice in which Asher was and a cold, clammy sweat broke out all over him. He could blast a thousand of them into nothing. But by sheer force, more body than his light static gun could down, they would overwhelm him.

His mind raced swiftly. He remembered the location, out in the control room, of the cage elevator that ran to the surface. It had not been hurt by the glycerine blast that had trapped Asher. The elevator shaft from the control room was cased clear into the cavern floor, and the blast had not jarred this far.

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He wheeled and sent another charge of static electricity into the crevice back of him, then lunged out into the control room. It would be his own weapon against Krenski's, and a chance to gain the bottom of the shaft.

Krenski--piled, charred heaps of the Petrolia around him, which had

momentarily cleared the attack--was running across the control room. Like a seething wave, the foul Petrolia undulated from every crevice and hallway, coming in to fresh attack. The Russian, terror lending him speed, raced for the cage at the foot of the shaft that led to the surface. At the same time Asher ran out.

Nearly a hundred feet apart, on opposite sides of the cavern, they stopped. Krenski turned his heavy weapon toward Asher at the same time Asher sent his own gun crackling and snapping out blue, fiery flame.

Side-stepping, now crouching, now dodging to this side and that, they fought their strange duel. Asher's right arm was burned, his hair singed from his head, and his body jarred again and again as Krenski touched him. Krenski, groaning through gritted teeth, suffered burns all over his chest and left leg.

As the Petrolia came on, and the lightning play of deadly electric charges continued, Asher made a discovery. He noticed that the rays, or charges, of the two guns, when they met in mid-air, caused blue flame, and that the charge went no farther.

It did it again. The two charges met, crackled to explosion in the air. Krenski, too, noticed it, and he also noticed that the Petrolia were almost upon them again. Coming on in a wave that could not be hurled back.

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He looked at Asher, and met the dare in Asher's eyes. Straight at each other, neither moving, they shot their static charges. Neither would move: it was a challenge from Asher that Krenski had to meet. One of them would have to die before the other would be able to gain the cage in the shaft. There could be no compromise, and only one man at a time could go surfaceward. If they continued to dodge and fight, the Petrolia would overwhelm them.

Power against power, they fought it out.

Asher's finger tightened on his trigger release until it seemed the skin would split; then he caused his hand to tremble just enough to make his electric charges cover the space in which Krenski's charges traveled. Hissing, spitting, flashing explosions, giving off sounds and light like big explosions of flash powder, the charges met.

Asher tingled from head to foot, and thrilled to the very marvel of the thing. Two deadly beams of electricity, holding each other off!

In one long, continuous flash, the contact point of the charges began to shift. Closer and closer, as the force of superior charges cleaved through the other, the contact points neared Krenski. He saw death upon him, for in another instant, Asher's charges would hurl his own bolts back upon him. The smaller weapon of Blaine Asher, attracting more static electric currents by reason of having a small attracting battery inside, where the larger gun of the other depended upon magnets for attraction, was triumphing.

Krenski's mustache and light beard singed and curled. He cried out, stepped back, throwing up his arms as death flashed through his body.

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His gun playing about him, Asher raced toward the big valves and gates that shut off the drain of the pipe-lines. Burning, reeking of sulphur and burned leather, the Petrolia vanished before him. But, as he turned, the drainage system that was robbing the field shut off. They had blocked his way again!

Too many to blast away altogether, they pressed in. Asher leaped forward, feet kicking, left fist smashing out, static gun crackling as if to tell him that nothing could stop them. Tentacles gripped at him, the foul, stinking smell gagged him. But the squeaks of the Petrolia maddened him.

"Squeak, damn you!" Asher shouted wildly, kicking, shooting and hitting, gaining toward the shaft. "Squeak--for all the damned Things that ever bred below the earth cannot stop one surface man!"

He burned and fought his way through and jumped into the cage as his gun electrocuted two of the Petrolia that tried to weave in after him. As he slammed the door, Asher was conscious that something was happening. He hesitated, just long enough to see the cavern start buckling and caving. The pressure of the oil, now shut off, was filling back toward the surface, creating a mighty pressure downward. The surface wells would produce man's power-fuel once more.

Asher slammed the door, turned on the power, and the cage shot upward.

A half hour later, those waiting on the floor of the derrick above the hole in which Asher had gone down, started. Asher, burned, wounded, blood streaming from his battered body, staggered in and collapsed at their feet.

* * * * *

"I can't believe it! Insane! Impossible! Yet, every well in this field has started producing again! And when we went to that old, abandoned wildcat well, we found the shaft opening! I had it covered up, as you ordered."

R. Briggs Johns paced up and down the laboratory floor, talking to Asher, who had just arisen from his bed, two weeks after he had collapsed at their feet in the derrick. Still bandaged, he was a different Blaine Asher. His face was lined, and the hair next to his scalp nearly snow white.

"I'll be able to do some walking around outside in a few days," Asher declared as he cleaned a test tube and placed it in a rack. "I can locate several wells over that underground storage cavern, and you can recover that oil. But you can't mine this field.

"Twenty years, perhaps, and you can. But it will take that long for those Petrolia to die out. We've got to get the oil out from below to a point where they can no longer spawn. We will apply mining in other fields--but not here!"

"Not here," Johns repeated, shuddering.

"It's up to you to see no one else tries it." Asher lit a cigarette and nodded at Johns. "Get control of the field--anything. Tell the oil men something. But don't tell them the truth. They wouldn't believe you. They would call you raving mad.

"The world does not know. It would not believe. Can we do other than remain silent?"

R. Briggs Johns, sick of thinking of the cavern world and horrible things below them, knew they could not.

THE SPIRIT OF A BURIED MAN.

Traditional, translated by Albert Henry Wratislaw
from *Sixty Folk-Tales from Exclusively Slavonic Sources*
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A poor scholar was going by the highway into a town, and found under the walls of the gate the body of a dead man, unburied, trodden by the feet of the passers-by. He had not much in his purse, but willingly gave enough to bury him, that he might not be spat upon and have sticks thrown at him. He performed his devotions over the fresh heaped-up grave, and went on into the world to wander. In an oak wood sleep overpowered him, and when he awoke, he espied with wonderment a bag full of gold. He thanked the unseen beneficent hand, and came to the bank of a large river, where it was necessary to be ferried over. The two ferrymen, observing the bag full of gold, took him into the boat, and just at an eddy took from him the gold and threw him into the water. As the waves carried him away insensible, he by accident clutched a plank, and by its aid floated successfully to the shore. It was not a plank, but the spirit of the buried man, who addressed him in these words: 'You honoured my remains by burial; I thank you for it. In token of gratitude I will teach you how you can transform yourself into a crow, into a hare, and into a deer.' Then he taught him the spell. The scholar, when acquainted with the spell, could with ease transform himself into a crow, into a hare, and into a deer. He wandered far, he wandered wide, till he wandered to the court of a mighty king, where he remained as an archer in attendance at the court. This king had a beautiful daughter, but she dwelt on an inaccessible island, surrounded on all sides by the sea. She dwelt in a castle of copper, and possessed a sword such that he who brandished it could conquer the largest army. Enemies had invaded the territory of the king; he needed and desired the victorious sword. But how to obtain it, when nobody had up to that time succeeded in getting on to the lonely island? He therefore made proclamation that whoever should bring the victorious sword from the princess should obtain her hand, and, moreover, should sit upon the throne after him. No one was venturesome enough to attempt it, till the wandering scholar, then an archer attached to the court, stood before the king announcing

his readiness to go, and requesting a letter, that on receipt of that token the princess might give up the weapon to him. All men were astonished, and the king entrusted him with a letter to his daughter. He went into the forest, without knowing in the least that another archer attached to the court was dogging his steps. He first transformed himself into a hare, then into a deer, and darted off with haste and speed; he traversed no small distance, till he stood on the shore of the sea. He then transformed himself into a crow, flew across the water of the sea, and didn't rest till he was on the island. He went into the castle of copper, delivered to the beautiful princess the letter from her father, and requested her to give him the victorious sword. The beautiful princess looked at the archer. He captured her heart at once. She asked inquisitively how he had been able to get to her castle, which was on all sides surrounded by water and knew no human footsteps. Thereupon the archer replied that he knew secret spells by which he could transform himself into a deer, a hare, and a crow. The beautiful princess, therefore, requested the archer to transform himself into a deer before her eyes. When he made himself into a graceful deer, and began to fawn and bound, the princess secretly pulled a tuft of fur from his back. When he transformed himself again into a hare, and bounded with pricked up ears, the princess secretly pulled a little fur off his back. When he changed himself into a crow and began to fly about in the room, the princess secretly pulled a few feathers from the bird's wings. She immediately wrote a letter to her father and delivered up the victorious sword. The young scholar flew across the sea in the form of a crow, then ran a great distance in that of a deer, till in the neighbourhood of the wood he bounded as a hare. The treacherous archer was already there in ambush, saw when he changed himself into a hare, and recognised him at once. He drew his bow, let fly the arrow, and killed the hare. He took from him the letter and carried off the sword, went to the castle, delivered to the king the letter and the sword of victory, and demanded at once the fulfilment of the promise that had been made. The king, transported with joy, promised him immediately his daughter's hand, mounted his horse, and rode boldly against his enemies with the sword. Scarcely had he espied their standards, when he brandished the sword mightily several times, and that towards the

four quarters of the world. At every wave of the sword large masses of enemies fell dead on the spot, and others, seized with panic, fled like hares. The king returned joyful with victory, and sent for his beautiful daughter, to give her to wife to the archer who brought the sword. A banquet was prepared. The musicians were already striking up, the whole castle was brilliantly lighted; but the princess sat sorrowful beside the assassin-archer. She knew at once that he was in nowise the man whom she saw in the castle on the island, but she dared not ask her father where the other handsome archer was; she only wept much and secretly: her heart beat for the other.

The poor scholar, in the hare's skin, lay slain under the oak, lay there a whole year, till one night he felt himself awakened from a mighty sleep, and before him stood the well-known spirit, whose body he had buried. He told him what had happened to him, brought him back to life, and said: 'To-morrow is the princess's wedding; hasten, therefore, to the castle without a moment's delay; she will recognise you; the archer, too, who killed you treacherously, will recognise you.' The young man sprang up promptly, went to the castle with throbbing heart, and entered the grand saloon, where numerous guests were eating and drinking. The beautiful princess recognised him at once, shrieked with joy, and fainted; and the assassin-archer, the moment he set eyes on him, turned pale and green from fear. Then the young man related the treason and murderous act of the archer, and in order to prove his words, turned himself in presence of all the assembled company into a graceful deer, and began to fawn upon the princess. She placed the tuft of fur pulled off him in the castle on the back of the deer, and the fur immediately grew into its place. Again he transformed himself into a hare, and similarly the piece of fur pulled off, which the princess had kept, grew into its place immediately on contact. All looked on in astonishment till the young man changed himself into a crow. The princess brought out the feathers which she had pulled from its wings in the castle, and the feathers immediately grew into their places. Then the old king commanded the assassin-archer to be put to death. Four horses were led out, all wild and unbroken. He was bound to them by his hands and feet, the horses were started off by the whip, and at one bound they tore the

assassin-archer to pieces. The young man obtained the hand of the young and charming princess. The whole castle was in a brilliant blaze of light, they drank, they ate with mirth; and the princess did not weep, for she possessed the husband that she wished for.

ANYUTA

by Anton Chekhov, Translated by Constance Garnett
from *The Darling and Other Stories*
EBook #13416

IN the cheapest room of a big block of furnished apartments Stepan Klotchkov, a medical student in his third year, was walking to and fro, zealously conning his anatomy. His mouth was dry and his forehead perspiring from the unceasing effort to learn it by heart.

In the window, covered by patterns of frost, sat on a stool the girl who shared his room--Anyuta, a thin little brunette of five-and-twenty, very pale with mild grey eyes. Sitting with bent back she was busy embroidering with red thread the collar of a man's shirt. She was working against time. . . . The clock in the passage struck two drowsily, yet the little room had not been put to rights for the morning. Crumpled bed-clothes, pillows thrown about, books, clothes, a big filthy slop-pail filled with soap-suds in which cigarette ends were swimming, and the litter on the floor--all seemed as though purposely jumbled together in one confusion. . . .

"The right lung consists of three parts . . ." Klotchkov repeated. "Boundaries! Upper part on anterior wall of thorax reaches the fourth or fifth rib, on the lateral surface, the fourth rib . . . behind to the _spina scapulæ_. . ."

Klotchkov raised his eyes to the ceiling, striving to visualise what he had just read. Unable to form a clear picture of it, he began feeling his upper ribs through his waistcoat.

"These ribs are like the keys of a piano," he said. "One must familiarise oneself with them somehow, if one is not to get muddled over them. One must study them in the skeleton and the living body . . . I say, Anyuta, let me pick them out."

Anyuta put down her sewing, took off her blouse, and straightened herself up. Klotchkov sat down facing her, frowned, and began counting her ribs.

"H'm! . . . One can't feel the first rib; it's behind the shoulder-blade This must be the second rib. . . . Yes . . . this is the third . . . this is the fourth. . . . H'm! . . . yes. . . . Why are you wriggling?"

"Your fingers are cold!"

"Come, come . . . it won't kill you. Don't twist about. That must be the third rib, then . . . this is the fourth. . . . You look such a skinny thing, and yet one can hardly feel your ribs. That's the second . . . that's the third. . . . Oh, this is muddling, and one can't see it clearly. . . . I must draw it. . . . Where's my crayon?"

Klotchkov took his crayon and drew on Anyuta's chest several parallel lines corresponding with the ribs.

"First-rate. That's all straightforward. . . . Well, now I can sound you. Stand up!"

Anyuta stood up and raised her chin. Klotchkov began sounding her, and was so absorbed in this occupation that he did not notice how Anyuta's lips, nose, and fingers turned blue with cold. Anyuta shivered, and was afraid the student, noticing it, would leave off drawing and sounding her, and then, perhaps, might fail in his exam.

"Now it's all clear," said Klotchkov when he had finished. "You sit like that and don't rub off the crayon, and meanwhile I'll learn up a little more."

And the student again began walking to and fro, repeating to himself. Anyuta, with black stripes across her chest, looking as though she had been tattooed, sat thinking, huddled up and shivering with cold. She said very little as a rule; she was always silent, thinking and thinking. . . .

In the six or seven years of her wanderings from one furnished room

to another, she had known five students like Klotchkov. Now they had all finished their studies, had gone out into the world, and, of course, like respectable people, had long ago forgotten her. One of them was living in Paris, two were doctors, the fourth was an artist, and the fifth was said to be already a professor. Klotchkov was the sixth. . . . Soon he, too, would finish his studies and go out into the world. There was a fine future before him, no doubt, and Klotchkov probably would become a great man, but the present was anything but bright; Klotchkov had no tobacco and no tea, and there were only four lumps of sugar left. She must make haste and finish her embroidery, take it to the woman who had ordered it, and with the quarter rouble she would get for it, buy tea and tobacco.

"Can I come in?" asked a voice at the door.

Anyuta quickly threw a woollen shawl over her shoulders. Fetisov, the artist, walked in.

"I have come to ask you a favour," he began, addressing Klotchkov, and glaring like a wild beast from under the long locks that hung over his brow. "Do me a favour; lend me your young lady just for a couple of hours! I'm painting a picture, you see, and I can't get on without a model."

"Oh, with pleasure," Klotchkov agreed. "Go along, Anyuta."

"The things I've had to put up with there," Anyuta murmured softly.

"Rubbish! The man's asking you for the sake of art, and not for any sort of nonsense. Why not help him if you can?"

Anyuta began dressing.

"And what are you painting?" asked Klotchkov.

"Psyche; it's a fine subject. But it won't go, somehow. I have to keep painting from different models. Yesterday I was painting one with blue legs. 'Why are your legs blue?' I asked her. 'It's my

stockings stain them,' she said. And you're still grinding! Lucky fellow! You have patience."

"Medicine's a job one can't get on with without grinding."

"H'm! . . . Excuse me, Klotchkov, but you do live like a pig! It's awful the way you live!"

"How do you mean? I can't help it. . . . I only get twelve roubles a month from my father, and it's hard to live decently on that."

"Yes . . . yes . . ." said the artist, frowning with an air of disgust; "but, still, you might live better. . . . An educated man is in duty bound to have taste, isn't he? And goodness knows what it's like here! The bed not made, the slops, the dirt . . . yesterday's porridge in the plates. . . Tfoo!"

"That's true," said the student in confusion; "but Anyuta has had no time to-day to tidy up; she's been busy all the while."

When Anyuta and the artist had gone out Klotchkov lay down on the sofa and began learning, lying down; then he accidentally dropped asleep, and waking up an hour later, propped his head on his fists and sank into gloomy reflection. He recalled the artist's words that an educated man was in duty bound to have taste, and his surroundings actually struck him now as loathsome and revolting. He saw, as it were in his mind's eye, his own future, when he would see his patients in his consulting-room, drink tea in a large dining-room in the company of his wife, a real lady. And now that slop-pail in which the cigarette ends were swimming looked incredibly disgusting. Anyuta, too, rose before his imagination--a plain, slovenly, pitiful figure . . . and he made up his mind to part with her at once, at all costs.

When, on coming back from the artist's, she took off her coat, he got up and said to her seriously:

"Look here, my good girl . . . sit down and listen. We must part!

The fact is, I don't want to live with you any longer."

Anyuta had come back from the artist's worn out and exhausted. Standing so long as a model had made her face look thin and sunken, and her chin sharper than ever. She said nothing in answer to the student's words, only her lips began to tremble.

"You know we should have to part sooner or later, anyway," said the student. "You're a nice, good girl, and not a fool; you'll understand. . . ."

Anyuta put on her coat again, in silence wrapped up her embroidery in paper, gathered together her needles and thread: she found the screw of paper with the four lumps of sugar in the window, and laid it on the table by the books.

"That's . . . your sugar . . ." she said softly, and turned away to conceal her tears.

"Why are you crying?" asked Klotchkov.

He walked about the room in confusion, and said:

"You are a strange girl, really. . . . Why, you know we shall have to part. We can't stay together for ever."

She had gathered together all her belongings, and turned to say good-bye to him, and he felt sorry for her.

"Shall I let her stay on here another week?" he thought. "She really may as well stay, and I'll tell her to go in a week;" and vexed at his own weakness, he shouted to her roughly:

"Come, why are you standing there? If you are going, go; and if you don't want to, take off your coat and stay! You can stay!"

Anyuta took off her coat, silently, stealthily, then blew her nose also stealthily, sighed, and noiselessly returned to her invariable

position on her stool by the window.

The student drew his textbook to him and began again pacing from corner to corner. "The right lung consists of three parts," he repeated; "the upper part, on anterior wall of thorax, reaches the fourth or fifth rib"

In the passage some one shouted at the top of his voice: "Grigory! The samovar!"

SELECTING THE FACULTY

by Baynard Rust Hall

from *The Wit and Humor of America, Volume III.*

EBook #18734

Our Board of Trustees, it will be remembered, had been directed by the Legislature to procure, as the ordinance called it, "Teachers for the commencement of the State College at Woodville." That business, by the Board, was committed to Dr. Sylvan and Robert Carlton--the most learned gentleman of the body, and of--the New Purchase. Our honorable Board will be more specially introduced hereafter; at present we shall bring forward certain rejected candidates, that, like rejected prize essays, they may be published, and _thus_ have their revenge.

None can tell us how plenty good things are till he looks for them; and hence, to the great surprise of the Committee, there seemed to be a sudden growth and a large crop of persons even in and around Woodville, either already qualified for the "Professorships," as we named them in our publication, or who _could_ "qualify" by the time of election. As to the "chair" named also in our publications, one very worthy and disinterested schoolmaster offered, as a great collateral inducement for his being elected, "_to find his own chair!_"--a vast saving to the State, if the same chair I saw in Mr. Whackum's school-room. For his chair there was one with a hickory bottom; and doubtless he would have filled it, and even lapped over its edges, with equal dignity in the recitation room of Big College.

The Committee had, at an early day, given an invitation to the Rev. Charles Clarence, A.M., of New Jersey, and his answer had been affirmative; yet for political reasons we had been obliged to invite competitors, or _make_ them, and we found and created "a right smart sprinkle."

Hopes of success were built on many things--for instance, on poverty; a plea being entered that something ought to be done for the poor fellow--on one's having taught a common school all his born days, who now deserved to rise a peg--on political, or religious, or fanatical partizan qualifications--and on pure patriotic principles, such as a

person's having been "born in a canebrake and rocked in a sugar trough." On the other hand, a fat, dull-headed, and modest Englishman asked for a place, because he had been born in Liverpool! and had seen the world beyond the woods and waters, too! And another fussy, talkative, pragmatical little gentleman rested his pretensions on his ability to draw and paint maps!--not projecting them in roundabout scientific processes, but in that speedy and elegant style in which young ladies _copy_ maps at first chop boarding-schools! Nay, so transcendent seemed Mr. Merchator's claims, when his _show_ or _sample_ maps were exhibited to us, that some in our Board, and nearly everybody out of it, were confident he would do for Professor of Mathematics and even Principal.

But of all our unsuccessful candidates, we shall introduce by name only two--Mr. James Jimmy, A.S.S., and Mr. Solomon Rapid, A. to Z.

Mr. Jimmy, who aspired to the mathematical chair, was master of a small school of all sexes, near Woodville. At the first, he was kindly, yet honestly told, his knowledge was too limited and inaccurate; yet, notwithstanding this, and some almost rude repulses afterward, he persisted in his application and his hopes. To give evidence of competency, he once told me he was arranging a new spelling-book, the publication of which would make him known as a literary man, and be an unspeakable advantage to "the rising generation." And this naturally brought on the following colloquy about the work:

"Ah! indeed! Mr. Jimmy?"

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Carlton."

"On what new principle do you go, sir?"

"Why, sir, on the principles of nature and common sense. I allow school-books for schools are all too powerful obtruse and hard-like to be understood without exemplifying illustrations."

"Yes, but Mr. Jimmy, how is a child's spelling-book to be made any plainer?"

"Why, sir, by clear explanations of the words in one column, by exemplifying illustrations in the other."

"I do not understand you, Mr. Jimmy, give me a specimen--"

"Sir?"

"An example--"

"To be sure--here's a spes-a-example; you see, for instance, I put in the spelling-column, C-r-e-a-m, _cream_, and here in the explification column, I put the exemplifying illustration--_Unctious part of milk!_"

We had asked, at our first interview, if our candidate was an algebraist, and his reply was _negative_; but, "he allowed he could '_qualify_' by the time of election, as he was powerful good at figures, and had cyphered clean through every arithmetic he had ever seen, the rule of promiscuous questions and all!" Hence, some weeks after, as I was passing his door, on my way to a squirrel hunt, with a party of friends, Mr. Jimmy, hurrying out with a slate in his hand, begged me to stop a moment, and thus addressed me:

"Well, Mr. Carlton, this algebra is a most powerful thing--ain't it?"

"Indeed it is, Mr. Jimmy--have you been looking into it?"

"Looking into it! I have been all through this here fust part; and by election time, I allow I'll be ready for examination."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir! but it is such a pretty thing! Only to think of cyphering by letters! Why, sir, the sums come out, and bring the answers exactly like figures. Jist stop a minute--look here: _a_ stands for 6, and _b_ stands for 8, and _c_ stands for 4, and _d_ stands for figure 10; now if I say a plus b minus c equals d, it is all the same as if I said, 6 is 6 and 8 makes 14, and 4 subtracted, leaves 10! Why, sir, I done a whole slate full of letters and signs; and afterward, when I tried by figures, they

every one of them came out right and brung the answer! I mean to cypher by letters altogether."

"Mr. Jimmy, my company is nearly out of sight--if you can get along this way through simple and quadratic equations by our meeting, your chance will not be so bad--good morning, sir."

But our man of "letters" quit cyphering the new way, and returned to plain figures long before reaching equations; and so he could not become our professor. Yet anxious to do us all the good in his power, after our college opened, he waited on me, a leading trustee, with a proposal to board our students, and authorized me to publish--"as how Mr. James Jimmy will take strange students--students not belonging to Woodville--to board, at one dollar a week, and find everything, washing included, and will black their _shoes_ three times a week to _boot_, and--_give them their dog-wood and cherry-bitters every morning into the bargain!_"

The most extraordinary candidate, however, was Mr. Solomon Rapid. He was now somewhat advanced into the shaving age, and was ready to assume offices the most opposite in character; although justice compels us to say Mr. Rapid was as fit for one thing as another. Deeming it waste of time to prepare for any station till he was certain of obtaining it, he wisely demanded the place first, and then set to work to become qualified for its duties, being, I suspect, the very man, or some relation of his, who is recorded as not knowing whether he could read Greek, as he had never tried. And, besides, Mr. Solomon Rapid contended that all offices, from president down to fence-viewer, were open to every white American citizen; and that every republican had a blood-bought right to seek any that struck his fancy; and if the profits were less, or the duties more onerous than had been anticipated, that a man ought to resign and try another.

Naturally, therefore, Mr. Rapid thought he would like to sit in our chair of languages, or have some employment in the State college; and hence he called for that purpose on Dr. Sylvan, who, knowing the candidate's character, maliciously sent him to me. Accordingly, the young gentleman presented himself, and without ceremony, instantly made

known his business thus:

"I heerd, sir, you wanted somebody to teach the State school, and I'm come to let you know I'm willing to take the place."

"Yes, sir, we are going to elect a professor of languages who is to be the principal and a professor--"

"Well, I don't care which I take, but I'm willing to be the principal. I can teach sifring, reading, writing, joggerfee, surveying, grammur, spelling, definition, parsin--"

"Are you a linguist?"

"Sir?"

"You, of course, understand the dead languages?"

"Well, can't say I ever seed much of them, though I have heerd tell of them; but I can soon larn them--they ain't more than a few of them I allow?"

"Oh! my dear sir, it is not possible--we--can't--"

"Well, I never seed what I couldn't larn about as smart as anybody--"

"Mr. Rapid, I do not mean to question your abilities; but if you are now wholly unacquainted with the dead languages, it is impossible for you or any other talented man to learn them under four or five years."

"Pshoo! foo! I'll bet I larn one in three weeks! Try me, sir,--let's have the furst one furst--how many are there?"

"Mr. Rapid, it is utterly impossible; but if you insist, I will loan you a Latin book--"

"That's your sort, let's have it, that's all I want, fair play."

Accordingly, I handed him a copy of *Historiæ Sacræ*, with which he soon went away, saying, he "didn't allow it would take long to git through Latin, if 'twas only sich a thin patch of a book as that."

In a few weeks, to my no small surprise, Mr. Solomon Rapid again presented himself; and drawing forth the book began with a triumphant expression of countenance:

"Well, sir, I have done the Latin."

"Done the Latin!"

"Yes, I can read it as fast as English."

"Read it as fast as English!!"

"Yes, as fast as English--and I didn't find it hard at all."

"May I try you on a page?"

"Try away, try away; that's what I've come for."

"Please read here then, Mr. Rapid;" and in order to give him a fair chance, I pointed to the first lines of the first chapter, viz.: "In principio Deus creavit coelum et terram intra sex dies; primo die fecit lucem," etc.

"That, sir?" and then he read thus, "In prinspo duse creevit kalelum et terrum intra sex dyes--primmo dye fe-fe-sit looseum," etc.

"That will do, Mr. Rapid--"

"Ah! ha! I told you so."

"Yes, yes--but translate."

"Translate!" (eyebrows elevating.)

"Yes, translate, render it."

"Render it!! how's that?" (forehead more wrinkled.)

"Why, yes, render it into English--give me the meaning of it."

"MEANING!!" (staring full in my face, his eyes like saucers, and forehead wrinkled with the furrows of eighty)--"MEANING!! I didn't know it _had_ any meaning. I thought it was a DEAD language!!"

* * * * *

Well, reader, I am glad you are _not_ laughing at Mr. Rapid; for how should anything _dead_ speak out so as to be understood? And indeed, does not his definition suit the vexed feelings of some young gentlemen attempting to read Latin without any interlinear translation? and who inwardly, cursing both book and teacher, blast their souls "if they can make any sense out of it." The ancients may yet speak in their own languages to a few; but to most who boast the honor of their acquaintance, they are certainly dead in the sense of Solomon Rapid.

THE FIVE WHITE MICE

by Stephen Crane

from *The Open Boat and Other Stories*

eBook #45524

Freddie was mixing a cock-tail. His hand with the long spoon was whirling swiftly, and the ice in the glass hummed and rattled like a cheap watch. Over by the window, a gambler, a millionaire, a railway conductor, and the agent of a vast American syndicate were playing seven-up. Freddie surveyed them with the ironical glance of a man who is mixing a cock-tail.

From time to time a swarthy Mexican waiter came with his tray from the rooms at the rear, and called his orders across the bar. The sounds of the indolent stir of the city, awakening from its siesta, floated over the screens which barred the sun and the inquisitive eye. From the far-away kitchen could be heard the roar of the old French _chef_, driving, herding, and abusing his Mexican helpers.

A string of men came suddenly in from the street. They stormed up to the bar. There were impatient shouts. "Come now, Freddie, don't stand there like a portrait of yourself. Wiggle!" Drinks of many kinds and colours, amber, green, mahogany, strong and mild, began to swarm upon the bar with all the attendants of lemon, sugar, mint and ice. Freddie, with Mexican support, worked like a sailor in the provision of them, sometimes talking with that scorn for drink and admiration for those who drink which is the attribute of a good bar-keeper.

At last a man was afflicted with a stroke of dice-shaking. A herculean discussion was waging, and he was deeply engaged in it, but at the same time he lazily flirted the dice. Occasionally he made great combinations. "Look at that, would you?" he cried proudly. The others paid little heed. Then violently the craving took them. It went along the line like an epidemic, and involved them all. In a moment they had arranged a carnival of dice-shaking with money penalties and liquid prizes. They clamorously made it a point of honour with Freddie that he should play and take his chance of sometimes providing this large group with free refreshment. With bended heads like football players,

they surged over the tinkling dice, jostling, cheering, and bitterly arguing. One of the quiet company playing seven-up at the corner table said profanely that the row reminded him of a bowling contest at a picnic.

After the regular shower, many carriages rolled over the smooth calle, and sent a musical thunder through the Casa Verde. The shop-windows became aglow with light, and the walks were crowded with youths, callow and ogling, dressed vainly according to superstitious fashions. The policemen had muffled themselves in their gnome-like cloaks, and placed their lanterns as obstacles for the carriages in the middle of the street. The city of Mexico gave forth the deep organ-mellow tones of its evening resurrection.

But still the group at the bar of the Casa Verde were shaking dice. They had passed beyond shaking for drinks for the crowd, for Mexican dollars, for dinners, for the wine at dinner. They had even gone to the trouble of separating the cigars and cigarettes from the dinner's bill, and causing a distinct man to be responsible for them. Finally they were aghast. Nothing remained in sight of their minds which even remotely suggested further gambling. There was a pause for deep consideration.

"Well----"

"Well----"

A man called out in the exuberance of creation. "I know! Let's shake for a box to-night at the circus! A box at the circus!" The group was profoundly edified. "That's it! That's it! Come on now! Box at the circus!" A dominating voice cried--"Three dashes--high man out!" An American, tall, and with a face of copper red from the rays that flash among the Sierra Madres and burn on the cactus deserts, took the little leathern cup and spun the dice out upon the polished wood. A fascinated assemblage hung upon the bar-rail. Three kings turned their pink faces upward. The tall man flourished the cup, burlesquing, and flung the two other dice. From them he ultimately extracted one more pink king. "There," he said. "Now, let's see! Four kings!" He began to swagger in

a sort of provisional way.

The next man took the cup, and blew softly in the top of it. Poising it in his hand, he then surveyed the company with a stony eye and paused. They knew perfectly well that he was applying the magic of deliberation and ostentatious indifference, but they could not wait in tranquillity during the performance of all these rites. They began to call out impatiently. "Come now--hurry up." At last the man, with a gesture that was singularly impressive, threw the dice. The others set up a howl of joy. "Not a pair!" There was another solemn pause. The men moved restlessly. "Come, now, go ahead!" In the end, the man, induced and abused, achieved something that was nothing in the presence of four kings. The tall man climbed on the foot-rail and leaned hazardously forward. "Four kings! My four kings are good to go out," he bellowed into the middle of the mob, and although in a moment he did pass into the radiant region of exemption, he continued to bawl advice and scorn.

The mirrors and oiled woods of the Casa Verde were now dancing with blue flashes from a great buzzing electric lamp. A host of quiet members of the Anglo-Saxon colony had come in for their pre-dinner cock-tails. An amiable person was exhibiting to some tourists this popular American saloon. It was a very sober and respectable time of day. Freddie reproved courageously the dice-shaking brawlers, and, in return, he received the choicest advice in a tumult of seven combined vocabularies. He laughed; he had been compelled to retire from the game, but he was keeping an interested, if furtive, eye upon it.

Down at the end of the line there was a youth at whom everybody railed for his flaming ill-luck. At each disaster, Freddie swore from behind the bar in a sort of affectionate contempt. "Why, this kid has had no luck for two days. Did you ever see such throwin'?"

The contest narrowed eventually to the New York kid and an individual who swung about placidly on legs that moved in nefarious circles. He had a grin that resembled a bit of carving. He was obliged to lean down and blink rapidly to ascertain the facts of his venture, but fate presented him with five queens. His smile did not change, but he puffed gently like a man who has been running.

The others, having emerged unscathed from this part of the conflict, waxed hilarious with the kid. They smote him on either shoulders. "We've got you stuck for it, kid! You can't beat that game! Five queens!"

Up to this time the kid had displayed only the temper of the gambler, but the cheerful hoots of the players, supplemented now by a ring of guying non-combatants, caused him to feel profoundly that it would be fine to beat the five queens. He addressed a gambler's slogan to the interior of the cup.

"Oh, five white mice of chance,
Shirts of wool and corduroy pants,
Gold and wine, women and sin,
All for you if you let me come in--
Into the house of chance."

Flashing the dice sardonically out upon the bar, he displayed three aces. From two dice in the next throw he achieved one more ace. For his last throw, he rattled the single dice for a long time. He already had four aces; if he accomplished another one, the five queens were vanquished and the box at the circus came from the drunken man's pocket. All the kid's movements were slow and elaborate. For the last throw he planted the cup bottom-down on the bar with the one dice hidden under it. Then he turned and faced the crowd with the air of a conjuror or a cheat.

"Oh, maybe it's an ace," he said in boastful calm. "Maybe it's an ace."

Instantly he was presiding over a little drama in which every man was absorbed. The kid leaned with his back against the bar-rail and with his elbows upon it.

"Maybe it's an ace," he repeated.

A jeering voice in the background said--"Yes, maybe it is, kid!"

The kid's eyes searched for a moment among the men. "I'll bet fifty dollars it is an ace," he said.

Another voice asked--"American money?"

"Yes," answered the kid.

"Oh!" There was a genial laugh at this discomfiture. However, no one came forward at the kid's challenge, and presently he turned to the cup. "Now, I'll show you." With the manner of a mayor unveiling a statue, he lifted the cup. There was revealed naught but a ten-spot. In the roar which arose could be heard each man ridiculing the cowardice of his neighbour, and above all the din rang the voice of Freddie be-rating every one. "Why, there isn't one liver to every five men in the outfit. That was the greatest cold bluff I ever saw worked. He wouldn't know how to cheat with dice if he wanted to. Don't know the first thing about it. I could hardly keep from laughin' when I seen him drillin' you around. Why, I tell you, I had that fifty dollars right in my pocket if I wanted to be a chump. You're an easy lot----"

Nevertheless the group who had won in the theatre-box game did not relinquish their triumph. They burst like a storm about the head of the kid, swinging at him with their fists. "'Five white mice!'" they quoted, choking. "'Five white mice!'"

"Oh, they are not so bad," said the kid.

Afterward it often occurred that a man would jeer a finger at the kid and derisively say--"'Five white mice.'"

On the route from the dinner to the circus, others of the party often asked the kid if he had really intended to make his appeal to mice. They suggested other animals--rabbits, dogs, hedgehogs, snakes, opossums. To this banter the kid replied with a serious expression of his belief in the fidelity and wisdom of the five white mice. He presented a most eloquent case, decorated with fine language and insults, in which he proved that if one was going to believe in anything at all, one might as well choose the five white mice. His

companions, however, at once and unanimously pointed out to him that his recent exploit did not place him in the light of a convincing advocate.

The kid discerned two figures in the street. They were making imperious signs at him. He waited for them to approach, for he recognized one as the other kid--the Frisco kid: there were two kids. With the Frisco kid was Benson. They arrived almost breathless. "Where you been?" cried the Frisco kid. It was an arrangement that upon a meeting the one that could first ask this question was entitled to use a tone of limitless injury. "What you been doing? Where you going? Come on with us. Benson and I have got a little scheme."

The New York kid pulled his arm from the grapple of the other. "I can't. I've got to take these sutlers to the circus. They stuck me for it shaking dice at Freddie's. I can't, I tell you."

The two did not at first attend to his remarks. "Come on! We've got a little scheme."

"I can't. They stuck me. I've got to take'm to the circus."

At this time it did not suit the men with the scheme to recognize these objections as important. "Oh, take'm some other time. Well, can't you take'm some other time? Let 'em go. Damn the circus. Get cold feet. What did you get stuck for? Get cold feet."

But despite their fighting, the New York kid broke away from them. "I can't, I tell you. They stuck me." As he left them, they yelled with rage. "Well, meet us, now, do you hear? In the Casa Verde as soon as the circus quits! Hear?" They threw maledictions after him.

In the city of Mexico, a man goes to the circus without descending in any way to infant amusements, because the Circo Teatro Orrin is one of the best in the world, and too easily surpasses anything of the kind in the United States, where it is merely a matter of a number of rings, if possible, and a great professional agreement to lie to the public. Moreover, the American clown, who in the Mexican arena prances

and gabbles, is the clown to whom writers refer as the delight of their childhood, and lament that he is dead. At this circus the kid was not debased by the sight of mournful prisoner elephants and caged animals forlorn and sickly. He sat in his box until late, and laughed and swore when past laughing at the comic foolish-wise clown.

When he returned to the Casa Verde there was no display of the Frisco kid and Benson. Freddie was leaning on the bar listening to four men terribly discuss a question that was not plain. There was a card-game in the corner, of course. Sounds of revelry pealed from the rear rooms.

When the kid asked Freddie if he had seen his friend and Benson, Freddie looked bored. "Oh, yes, they were in here just a minute ago, but I don't know where they went. They've got their skates on. Where've they been? Came in here rolling across the floor like two little gilt gods. They wobbled around for a time, and then Frisco wanted me to send six bottles of wine around to Benson's rooms, but I didn't have anybody to send this time of night, and so they got mad and went out. Where did they get their loads?"

In the first deep gloom of the street the kid paused a moment debating. But presently he heard quavering voices. "Oh, kid! kid! Com'ere!" Peering, he recognized two vague figures against the opposite wall. He crossed the street, and they said--"Hello-kid."

"Say, where did you get it?" he demanded sternly. "You Indians better go home. What did you want to get scragged for?" His face was luminous with virtue.

As they swung to and fro, they made angry denials. "We ain' load! We ain' load'. Big chump. Comonangetadrink."

The sober youth turned then to his friend. "Hadn't you better go home, kid? Come on, it's late. You'd better break away."

The Frisco kid wagged his head decisively. "Got take Benson home first. He'll be wallowing around in a minute. Don't mind me. I'm all right."

"Cerly, he's all right," said Benson, arousing from deep thought. "He's all right. But better take'm home, though. That's ri--right. He's load'. But he's all right. No need go home any more'n you. But better take'm home. He's load'." He looked at his companion with compassion. "Kid, you're load'."

The sober kid spoke abruptly to his friend from San Francisco. "Kid, pull yourself together, now. Don't fool. We've got to brace this ass of a Benson all the way home. Get hold of his other arm."

The Frisco kid immediately obeyed his comrade without a word or a glower. He seized Benson and came to attention like a soldier. Later, indeed, he meekly ventured--"Can't we take cab?" But when the New York kid snapped out that there were no convenient cabs he subsided to an impassive silence. He seemed to be reflecting upon his state, without astonishment, dismay, or any particular emotion. He submitted himself woodenly to the direction of his friend.

Benson had protested when they had grasped his arms. "Washa doing?" he said in a new and guttural voice. "Washa doing? I ain' load'. Comonangetadrink. I----"

"Oh, come along, you idiot," said the New York kid. The Frisco kid merely presented the mien of a stoic to the appeal of Benson, and in silence dragged away at one of his arms. Benson's feet came from that particular spot on the pavement with the reluctance of roots and also with the ultimate suddenness of roots. The three of them lurched out into the street in the abandon of tumbling chimneys. Benson was meanwhile noisily challenging the others to produce any reasons for his being taken home. His toes clashed into the kerb when they reached the other side of the calle, and for a moment the kids hauled him along with the points of his shoes scraping musically on the pavement. He balked formidably as they were about to pass the Casa Verde. "No! No! Leshavanothdrink! Anothdrink! Onemore!"

But the Frisco kid obeyed the voice of his partner in a manner that was blind but absolute, and they scummed Benson on past the door. Locked together the three swung into a dark street. The sober kid's flank was

continually careering ahead of the other wing. He harshly admonished the Frisco child, and the latter promptly improved in the same manner of unthinking complete obedience. Benson began to recite the tale of a love affair, a tale that didn't even have a middle. Occasionally the New York kid swore. They toppled on their way like three comedians playing at it on the stage.

At midnight a little Mexican street burrowing among the walls of the city is as dark as a whale's throat at deep sea. Upon this occasion heavy clouds hung over the capital and the sky was a pall. The projecting balconies could make no shadows.

"Shay," said Benson, breaking away from his escort suddenly, "what want come for? I ain't load'. You got reg'lar spool-fact'ry in your head--you N' York kid there. Thish oth' kid, he's mos' proper shober, mos' proper shober. He's drunk, but--but he's shober."

"Ah, shup up, Benson," said the New York kid. "Come along now. We can't stay here all night." Benson refused to be corralled, but spread his legs and twirled like a dervish, meanwhile under the evident impression that he was conducting himself most handsomely. It was not long before he gained the opinion that he was laughing at the others. "Eight purple dogsh--dogs! Eight purple dogs. Thas what kid'll see in the morn'. Look ou' for 'em. They--"

As Benson, describing the canine phenomena, swung wildly across the sidewalk, it chanced that three other pedestrians were passing in shadowy rank. Benson's shoulder jostled one of them.

A Mexican wheeled upon the instant. His hand flashed to his hip. There was a moment of silence, during which Benson's voice was not heard raised in apology. Then an indescribable comment, one burning word, came from between the Mexican's teeth.

Benson, rolling about in a semi-detached manner, stared vacantly at the Mexican, who thrust his lean face forward while his fingers played nervously at his hip. The New York kid could not follow Spanish well, but he understood when the Mexican breathed softly: "Does the señor

want to fight?"

Benson simply gazed in gentle surprise. The woman next to him at dinner had said something inventive. His tailor had presented his bill. Something had occurred which was mildly out of the ordinary, and his surcharged brain refused to cope with it. He displayed only the agitation of a smoker temporarily without a light.

The New York kid had almost instantly grasped Benson's arm, and was about to jerk him away, when the other kid, who up to this time had been an automaton, suddenly projected himself forward, thrust the rubber Benson aside, and said--"Yes."

There was no sound nor light in the world. The wall at the left happened to be of the common prison-like construction--no door, no window, no opening at all. Humanity was enclosed and asleep. Into the mouth of the sober kid came a wretched bitter taste as if it had filled with blood. He was transfixed as if he was already seeing the lightning ripples on the knife-blade.

But the Mexican's hand did not move at that time. His face went still further forward and he whispered--"So?" The sober kid saw this face as if he and it were alone in space--a yellow mask smiling in eager cruelty, in satisfaction, and above all it was lit with sinister decision. As for the features, they were reminiscent of an unplaced, a forgotten type, which really resembled with precision those of a man who had shaved him three times in Boston in 1888. But the expression burned his mind as sealing-wax burns the palm, and fascinated, stupefied, he actually watched the progress of the man's thought toward the point where a knife would be wrenched from its sheath. The emotion, a sort of mechanical fury, a breeze made by electric fans, a rage made by vanity, smote the dark countenance in wave after wave.

Then the New York kid took a sudden step forward. His hand was at his hip. He was gripping there a revolver of robust size. He recalled that upon its black handle was stamped a hunting scene in which a sportsman in fine leggings and a peaked cap was taking aim at a stag less than one-eighth of an inch away.

His pace forward caused instant movement of the Mexicans. One immediately took two steps to face him squarely. There was a general adjustment, pair and pair. This opponent of the New York kid was a tall man and quite stout. His sombrero was drawn low over his eyes. His serape was flung on his left shoulder. His back was bended in the supposed manner of a Spanish grandee. This concave gentleman cut a fine and terrible figure. The lad, moved by the spirits of his modest and perpendicular ancestors, had time to feel his blood roar at sight of the pose.

He was aware that the third Mexican was over on the left fronting Benson, and he was aware that Benson was leaning against the wall sleepily and peacefully eying the convention. So it happened that these six men stood, side fronting side, five of them with their right hands at their hips and with their bodies lifted nervously, while the central pair exchanged a crescendo of provocations. The meaning of their words rose and rose. They were travelling in a straight line toward collision.

The New York kid contemplated his Spanish grandee. He drew his revolver upward until the hammer was surely free of the holster. He waited immovable and watchful while the garrulous Frisco kid expended two and a half lexicons on the middle Mexican.

The eastern lad suddenly decided that he was going to be killed. His mind leaped forward and studied the aftermath. The story would be a marvel of brevity when first it reached the far New York home, written in a careful hand on a bit of cheap paper, topped and footed and backed by the printed fortifications of the cable company. But they are often as stones flung into mirrors, these bits of paper upon which are laconically written all the most terrible chronicles of the times. He witnessed the uprising of his mother and sister, and the invincible calm of his hard-mouthed old father, who would probably shut himself in his library and smoke alone. Then his father would come, and they would bring him here and say--"This is the place." Then, very likely, each would remove his hat. They would stand quietly with their hats in their hands for a decent minute. He pitied his old financing father,

unyielding and millioned, a man who commonly spoke twenty-two words a year to his beloved son. The kid understood it at this time. If his fate was not impregnable, he might have turned out to be a man and have been liked by his father.

The other kid would mourn his death. He would be preternaturally correct for some weeks, and recite the tale without swearing. But it would not bore him. For the sake of his dead comrade he would be glad to be preternaturally correct, and to recite the tale without swearing.

These views were perfectly stereopticon, flashing in and away from his thought with an inconceivable rapidity until after all they were simply one quick dismal impression. And now here is the unreal real: into this kid's nostrils, at the expectant moment of slaughter, had come the scent of new-mown hay, a fragrance from a field of prostrate grass, a fragrance which contained the sunshine, the bees, the peace of meadows, and the wonder of a distant crooning stream. It had no right to be supreme, but it was supreme, and he breathed it as he waited for pain and a sight of the unknown.

But in the same instant, it may be, his thought flew to the Frisco kid, and it came upon him like a flicker of lightning that the Frisco kid was not going to be there to perform, for instance, the extraordinary office of respectable mourner. The other kid's head was muddled, his hand was unsteady, his agility was gone. This other kid was facing the determined and most ferocious gentleman of the enemy. The New York kid became convinced that his friend was lost. There was going to be a screaming murder. He was so certain of it that he wanted to shield his eyes from sight of the leaping arm and the knife. It was sickening, utterly sickening. The New York kid might have been taking his first sea-voyage. A combination of honourable manhood and inability prevented him from running away.

He suddenly knew that it was possible to draw his own revolver, and by a swift manoeuvre face down all three Mexicans. If he was quick enough he would probably be victor. If any hitch occurred in the draw he would undoubtedly be dead with his friends. It was a new game; he had never been obliged to face a situation of this kind in the Beacon

Club in New York. In this test, the lungs of the kid still continued to perform their duty.

"Oh, five white mice of chance,
Shirts of wool and corduroy pants,
Gold and wine, women and sin,
All for you if you let me come in--
Into the house of chance."

He thought of the weight and size of his revolver, and dismay pierced him. He feared that in his hands it would be as unwieldy as a sewing-machine for this quick work. He imagined, too, that some singular providence might cause him to lose his grip as he raised his weapon. Or it might get fatally entangled in the tails of his coat. Some of the eels of despair lay wet and cold against his back.

But at the supreme moment the revolver came forth as if it were greased and it arose like a feather. This somnolent machine, after months of repose, was finally looking at the breasts of men.

Perhaps in this one series of movements, the kid had unconsciously used nervous force sufficient to raise a bale of hay. Before he comprehended it he was standing behind his revolver glaring over the barrel at the Mexicans, menacing first one and then another. His finger was trembling on the trigger. The revolver gleamed in the darkness with a fine silver light.

The fulsome grandee sprang backward with a low cry. The man who had been facing the Frisco kid took a quick step away. The beautiful array of Mexicans was suddenly disorganized.

The cry and the backward steps revealed something of great importance to the New York kid. He had never dreamed that he did not have a complete monopoly of all possible trepidations. The cry of the grandee was that of a man who suddenly sees a poisonous snake. Thus the kid was able to understand swiftly that they were all human beings. They were unanimous in not wishing for too bloody combat. There was a sudden expression of the equality. He had vaguely believed that they were not

going to evince much consideration for his dramatic development as an active factor. They even might be exasperated into an onslaught by it. Instead, they had respected his movement with a respect as great even as an ejaculation of fear and backward steps. Upon the instant he pounced forward and began to swear, unreeling great English oaths as thick as ropes, and lashing the faces of the Mexicans with them. He was bursting with rage, because these men had not previously confided to him that they were vulnerable. The whole thing had been an absurd imposition. He had been seduced into respectful alarm by the concave attitude of the grandee. And after all there had been an equality of emotion, an equality: he was furious. He wanted to take the serape of the grandee and swaddle him in it.

The Mexicans slunk back, their eyes burning wistfully. The kid took aim first at one and then at another. After they had achieved a certain distance they paused and drew up in a rank. They then resumed some of their old splendour of manner. A voice hailed him in a tone of cynical bravado as if it had come from between lips of smiling mockery. "Well, señor, it is finished?"

The kid scowled into the darkness, his revolver drooping at his side. After a moment he answered--"I am willing." He found it strange that he should be able to speak after this silence of years.

"Good-night, señor."

"Good-night."

When he turned to look at the Frisco kid he found him in his original position, his hand upon his hip. He was blinking in perplexity at the point from whence the Mexicans had vanished.

"Well," said the sober kid crossly, "are you ready to go home now?"

The Frisco kid said--"Where they gone?" His voice was undisturbed but inquisitive.

Benson suddenly propelled himself from his dreamful position against

the wall. "Frisco kid's all right. He's drunk's fool and he's all right. But you New York kid, you're shober." He passed into a state of profound investigation. "Kid shober 'cause didn't go with us. Didn't go with us 'cause went to damn circus. Went to damn circus 'cause lose shakin' dice. Lose shakin' dice 'cause--what make lose shakin' dice, kid?"

The New York kid eyed the senile youth. "I don't know. The five white mice, maybe."

Benson puzzled so over this reply that he had to be held erect by his friends. Finally the Frisco kid said--"Let's go home."

Nothing had happened.

THE MISSION OF JANE

by Edith Wharton

from *The Descent of Man and Other Stories*

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I

LETHBURY, surveying his wife across the dinner table, found his transient conjugal glance arrested by an indefinable change in her appearance.

"How smart you look! Is that a new gown?" he asked.

Her answering look seemed to deprecate his charging her with the extravagance of wasting a new gown on him, and he now perceived that the change lay deeper than any accident of dress. At the same time, he noticed that she betrayed her consciousness of it by a delicate, almost frightened blush. It was one of the compensations of Mrs. Lethbury's protracted childishness that she still blushed as prettily as at eighteen. Her body had been privileged not to outstrip her mind, and the two, as it seemed to Lethbury, were destined to travel together through an eternity of girlishness.

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

Since she never did, he always wondered at her bringing this out as a fresh grievance against him; but his wonder was unresentful, and he said good-humoredly: "You sparkle so that I thought you had on your diamonds."

She sighed and blushed again.

"It must be," he continued, "that you've been to a dressmaker's opening. You're absolutely brimming with illicit enjoyment."

She stared again, this time at the adjective. His adjectives always embarrassed her: their unintelligibleness savored of impropriety.

"In short," he summed up, "you've been doing something that you're thoroughly ashamed of."

To his surprise she retorted: "I don't see why I should be ashamed of it!"

Lethbury leaned back with a smile of enjoyment. When there was nothing better going he always liked to listen to her explanations.

"Well--?" he said.

She was becoming breathless and ejaculatory. "Of course you'll laugh--you laugh at everything!"

"That rather blunts the point of my derision, doesn't it?" he interjected; but she rushed on without noticing:

"It's so easy to laugh at things."

"Ah," murmured Lethbury with relish, "that's Aunt Sophronia's, isn't it?"

Most of his wife's opinions were heirlooms, and he took a quaint pleasure in tracing their descent. She was proud of their age, and saw no reason for discarding them while they were still serviceable. Some, of course, were so fine that she kept them for state occasions, like her great-grandmother's Crown Derby; but from the lady known as Aunt Sophronia she had inherited a stout set of every-day prejudices that were practically as good as new; whereas her husband's, as she noticed, were always having to be replaced. In the early days she had fancied there might be a certain satisfaction in taxing him with the fact; but she had long since been silenced by the reply: "My dear, I'm not a rich man, but I never use an opinion twice if I can help it."

She was reduced, therefore, to dwelling on his moral deficiencies; and one of the most obvious of these was his refusal to take things seriously. On this occasion, however, some ulterior purpose kept her from taking up his taunt.

"I'm not in the least ashamed!" she repeated, with the air of shaking a banner to the wind; but the domestic atmosphere being calm, the banner drooped unheroically.

"That," said Lethbury judicially, "encourages me to infer that you ought to be, and that, consequently, you've been giving yourself the unusual pleasure of doing something I shouldn't approve of."

She met this with an almost solemn directness. "No," she said. "You won't approve of it. I've allowed for that."

"Ah," he exclaimed, setting down his liqueur-glass. "You've worked out the whole problem, eh?"

"I believe so."

"That's uncommonly interesting. And what is it?"

She looked at him quietly. "A baby."

If it was seldom given her to surprise him, she had attained the distinction for once.

"A baby?"

"Yes."

"A--human baby?"

"Of course!" she cried, with the virtuous resentment of the woman who has never allowed dogs in the house.

Lethbury's puzzled stare broke into a fresh smile. "A baby I sha'n't approve of? Well, in the abstract I don't think much of them, I admit. Is this an abstract baby?"

Again she frowned at the adjective; but she had reached a pitch of

exaltation at which such obstacles could not deter her.

"It's the loveliest baby--" she murmured.

"Ah, then it's concrete. It exists. In this harsh world it draws its breath in pain--"

"It's the healthiest child I ever saw!" she indignantly corrected.

"You've seen it, then?"

Again the accusing blush suffused her. "Yes--I've seen it."

"And to whom does the paragon belong?"

And here indeed she confounded him. "To me--I hope," she declared.

He pushed his chair back with an inarticulate murmur. "To _you_--?"

"To _us_," she corrected.

"Good Lord!" he said. If there had been the least hint of hallucination in her transparent gaze--but no: it was as clear, as shallow, as easily fathomable as when he had first suffered the sharp surprise of striking bottom in it.

It occurred to him that perhaps she was trying to be funny: he knew that there is nothing more cryptic than the humor of the unhumorous.

"Is it a joke?" he faltered.

"Oh, I hope not. I want it so much to be a reality--"

He paused to smile at the limitations of a world in which jokes were not realities, and continued gently: "But since it is one already--"

"To us, I mean: to you and me. I want--" her voice wavered, and her eyes with it. "I have always wanted so dreadfully...it has been such a

disappointment...not to..."

"I see," said Lethbury slowly.

But he had not seen before. It seemed curious, now, that he had never thought of her taking it in that way, had never surmised any hidden depths beneath her outspread obviousness. He felt as though he had touched a secret spring in her mind.

There was a moment's silence, moist and tremulous on her part, awkward and slightly irritated on his.

"You've been lonely, I suppose?" he began. It was odd, having suddenly to reckon with the stranger who gazed at him out of her trivial eyes.

"At times," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"It was not your fault. A man has so many occupations; and women who are clever--or very handsome--I suppose that's an occupation too. Sometimes I've felt that when dinner was ordered I had nothing to do till the next day."

"Oh," he groaned.

"It wasn't your fault," she insisted. "I never told you--but when I chose that rose-bud paper for the front room upstairs, I always thought--"

"Well--?"

"It would be such a pretty paper--for a baby--to wake up in. That was years ago, of course; but it was rather an expensive paper... and it hasn't faded in the least..." she broke off incoherently.

"It hasn't faded?"

"No--and so I thought...as we don't use the room for anything ... now that Aunt Sophronia is dead...I thought I might... you might...oh, Julian, if you could only have seen it just waking up in its crib!"

"Seen what--where? You haven't got a baby upstairs?"

"Oh, no--not _yet_, " she said, with her rare laugh--the girlish bubbling of merriment that had seemed one of her chief graces in the early days. It occurred to him that he had not given her enough things to laugh about lately. But then she needed such very elementary things: it was as difficult to amuse her as a savage. He concluded that he was not sufficiently simple.

"Alice," he said, almost solemnly, "what _do_ you mean?"

She hesitated a moment: he saw her gather her courage for a supreme effort. Then she said slowly, gravely, as though she were pronouncing a sacramental phrase:

"I'm so lonely without a little child--and I thought perhaps you'd let me adopt one....It's at the hospital...its mother is dead...and I could...pet it, and dress it, and do things for it...and it's such a good baby...you can ask any of the nurses...it would never, _never_ bother you by crying..."

II

Lethbury accompanied his wife to the hospital in a mood of chastened wonder. It did not occur to him to oppose her wish. He knew, of course, that he would have to bear the brunt of the situation: the jokes at the club, the inquiries, the explanations. He saw himself in the comic role of the adopted father, and welcomed it as an expiation. For in his rapid reconstruction of the past he found himself cutting a shabbier figure than he cared to admit. He had always been intolerant of stupid people, and it was his punishment to be convicted of stupidity. As his mind traversed the years between his marriage and this unexpected assumption of paternity, he saw, in the light of an overheated

imagination, many signs of unwonted crassness. It was not that he had ceased to think his wife stupid: she was stupid, limited, inflexible; but there was a pathos in the struggles of her swaddled mind, in its blind reachings toward the primal emotions. He had always thought she would have been happier with a child; but he had thought it mechanically, because it had so often been thought before, because it was in the nature of things to think it of every woman, because his wife was so eminently one of a species that she fitted into all the generalizations on the sex. But he had regarded this generalization as merely typical of the triumph of tradition over experience. Maternity was no doubt the supreme function of primitive woman, the one end to which her whole organism tended; but the law of increasing complexity had operated in both sexes, and he had not seriously supposed that, outside the world of Christmas fiction and anecdotic art, such truisms had any special hold on the feminine imagination. Now he saw that the arts in question were kept alive by the vitality of the sentiments they appealed to.

Lethbury was in fact going through a rapid process of readjustment. His marriage had been a failure, but he had preserved toward his wife the exact fidelity of act that is sometimes supposed to excuse any divagation of feeling; so that, for years, the tie between them had consisted mainly in his abstaining from making love to other women. The abstention had not always been easy, for the world is surprisingly well-stocked with the kind of woman one ought to have married but did not; and Lethbury had not escaped the solicitation of such alternatives. His immunity had been purchased at the cost of taking refuge in the somewhat rarified atmosphere of his perceptions; and his world being thus limited, he had given unusual care to its details, compensating himself for the narrowness of his horizon by the minute finish of his foreground. It was a world of fine shadings and the nicest proportions, where impulse seldom set a blundering foot, and the feast of reason was undisturbed by an intemperate flow of soul. To such a banquet his wife naturally remained uninvited. The diet would have disagreed with her, and she would probably have objected to the other guests. But Lethbury, miscalculating her needs, had hitherto supposed that he had made ample provision for them, and was consequently at liberty to enjoy his own fare without any reproach of mendicancy at his

gates. Now he beheld her pressing a starved face against the windows of his life, and in his imaginative reaction he invested her with a pathos borrowed from the sense of his own shortcomings.

In the hospital, the imaginative process continued with increasing force. He looked at his wife with new eyes. Formerly she had been to him a mere bundle of negations, a labyrinth of dead walls and bolted doors. There was nothing behind the walls, and the doors led no-whither: he had sounded and listened often enough to be sure of that. Now he felt like a traveller who, exploring some ancient ruin, comes on an inner cell, intact amid the general dilapidation, and painted with images which reveal the forgotten uses of the building.

His wife stood by a white crib in one of the wards. In the crib lay a child, a year old, the nurse affirmed, but to Lethbury's eye a mere dateless fragment of humanity projected against a background of conjecture. Over this anonymous particle of life Mrs. Lethbury leaned, such ecstasy reflected in her face as strikes up, in Correggio's Night-piece, from the child's body to the mother's countenance. It was a light that irradiated and dazzled her. She looked up at an inquiry of Lethbury's, but as their glances met he perceived that she no longer saw him, that he had become as invisible to her as she had long been to him. He had to transfer his question to the nurse.

"What is the child's name?" he asked.

"We call her Jane," said the nurse.

III

Lethbury, at first, had resisted the idea of a legal adoption; but when he found that his wife's curiously limited imagination prevented her regarding the child as hers till it had been made so by process of law, he promptly withdrew his objection. On one point only he remained inflexible; and that was the changing of the waif's name. Mrs. Lethbury, almost at once, had expressed a wish to rechristen it: she fluctuated between Muriel and Gladys, deferring the moment of decision

like a lady wavering between two bonnets. But Lethbury was unyielding. In the general surrender of his prejudices this one alone held out.

"But Jane is so dreadful," Mrs. Lethbury protested.

"Well, we don't know that _she_ won't be dreadful. She may grow up a Jane."

His wife exclaimed reproachfully. "The nurse says she's the loveliest--"

"Don't they always say that?" asked Lethbury patiently. He was prepared to be inexhaustibly patient now that he had reached a firm foothold of opposition.

"It's cruel to call her Jane," Mrs. Lethbury pleaded.

"It's ridiculous to call her Muriel."

"The nurse is _sure_ she must be a lady's child."

Lethbury winced: he had tried, all along, to keep his mind off the question of antecedents.

"Well, let her prove it," he said, with a rising sense of exasperation. He wondered how he could ever have allowed himself to be drawn into such a ridiculous business; for the first time he felt the full irony of it. He had visions of coming home in the afternoon to a house smelling of linseed and paregoric, and of being greeted by a chronic howl as he went up stairs to dress for dinner. He had never been a club-man, but he saw himself becoming one now.

The worst of his anticipations were unfulfilled. The baby was surprisingly well and surprisingly quiet. Such infantile remedies as she absorbed were not potent enough to be perceived beyond the nursery; and when Lethbury could be induced to enter that sanctuary, there was nothing to jar his nerves in the mild pink presence of his adopted daughter. Jars there were, indeed: they were probably inevitable in the disturbed routine of the household; but they occurred between Mrs.

Lethbury and the nurses, and Jane contributed to them only a placid stare which might have served as a rebuke to the combatants.

In the reaction from his first impulse of atonement, Lethbury noted with sharpened perceptions the effect of the change on his wife's character. He saw already the error of supposing that it could work any transformation in her. It simply magnified her existing qualities. She was like a dried sponge put in water: she expanded, but she did not change her shape. From the stand-point of scientific observation it was curious to see how her stored instincts responded to the pseudo-maternal call. She overflowed with the petty maxims of the occasion. One felt in her the epitome, the consummation, of centuries of animal maternity, so that this little woman, who screamed at a mouse and was nervous about burglars, came to typify the cave-mother rending her prey for her young.

It was less easy to regard philosophically the practical effects of her borrowed motherhood. Lethbury found with surprise that she was becoming assertive and definite. She no longer represented the negative side of his life; she showed, indeed, a tendency to inconvenient affirmations. She had gradually expanded her assumption of motherhood till it included his own share in the relation, and he suddenly found himself regarded as the father of Jane. This was a contingency he had not foreseen, and it took all his philosophy to accept it; but there were moments of compensation. For Mrs. Lethbury was undoubtedly happy for the first time in years; and the thought that he had tardily contributed to this end reconciled him to the irony of the means.

At first he was inclined to reproach himself for still viewing the situation from the outside, for remaining a spectator instead of a participant. He had been allured, for a moment, by the vision of severed hands meeting over a cradle, as the whole body of domestic fiction bears witness to their doing; and the fact that no such conjunction took place he could explain only on the ground that it was a borrowed cradle. He did not dislike the little girl. She still remained to him a hypothetical presence, a query rather than a fact; but her nearness was not unpleasant, and there were moments when her tentative utterances, her groping steps, seemed to loosen the dry

accretions enveloping his inner self. But even at such moments--moments which he invited and caressed--she did not bring him nearer to his wife. He now perceived that he had made a certain place in his life for Mrs. Lethbury, and that she no longer fitted into it. It was too late to enlarge the space, and so she overflowed and encroached. Lethbury struggled against the sense of submergence. He let down barrier after barrier, yielded privacy after privacy; but his wife's personality continued to dilate. She was no longer herself alone: she was herself and Jane. Gradually, in a monstrous fusion of identity, she became herself, himself and Jane; and instead of trying to adapt her to a spare crevice of his character, he found himself carelessly squeezed into the smallest compartment of the domestic economy.

IV

He continued to tell himself that he was satisfied if his wife was happy; and it was not till the child's tenth year that he felt a doubt of her happiness.

Jane had been a preternaturally good child. During the eight years of her adoption she had caused her foster-parents no anxiety beyond those connected with the usual succession of youthful diseases. But her unknown progenitors had given her a robust constitution, and she passed unperturbed through measles, chicken-pox and whooping-cough. If there was any suffering it was endured vicariously by Mrs. Lethbury, whose temperature rose and fell with the patient's, and who could not hear Jane sneeze without visions of a marble angel weeping over a broken column. But though Jane's prompt recoveries continued to belie such premonitions, though her existence continued to move forward on an even keel of good health and good conduct, Mrs. Lethbury's satisfaction showed no corresponding advance. Lethbury, at first, was disposed to add her disappointment to the long list of feminine inconsistencies with which the sententious observer of life builds up his favorite induction; but circumstances presently led him to take a kindlier view of the case.

Hitherto his wife had regarded him as a negligible factor in Jane's

evolution. Beyond providing for his adopted daughter, and effacing himself before her, he was not expected to contribute to her well-being. But as time passed he appeared to his wife in a new light. It was he who was to educate Jane. In matters of the intellect, Mrs. Lethbury was the first to declare her deficiencies--to proclaim them, even, with a certain virtuous superiority. She said she did not pretend to be clever, and there was no denying the truth of the assertion. Now, however, she seemed less ready, not to own her limitations, but to glory in them. Confronted with the problem of Jane's instruction, she stood in awe of the child.

"I have always been stupid, you know," she said to Lethbury with a new humility, "and I'm afraid I sha'n't know what is best for Jane. I'm sure she has a wonderfully good mind, and I should reproach myself if I didn't give her every opportunity." She looked at him helplessly. "You must tell me what ought to be done."

Lethbury was not unwilling to oblige her. Somewhere in his mental lumber-room there rusted a theory of education such as usually lingers among the impedimenta of the childless. He brought this out, refurbished it, and applied it to Jane. At first he thought his wife had not overrated the quality of the child's mind. Jane seemed extraordinarily intelligent. Her precocious definiteness of mind was encouraging to her inexperienced preceptor. She had no difficulty in fixing her attention, and he felt that every fact he imparted was being etched in metal. He helped his wife to engage the best teachers, and for a while continued to take an ex-official interest in his adopted daughter's studies. But gradually his interest waned. Jane's ideas did not increase with her acquisitions. Her young mind remained a mere receptacle for facts: a kind of cold-storage from which anything that had been put there could be taken out at a moment's notice, intact but congealed. She developed, moreover, an inordinate pride in the capacity of her mental storehouse, and a tendency to pelt her public with its contents. She was overheard to jeer at her nurse for not knowing when the Saxon Heptarchy had fallen, and she alternately dazzled and depressed Mrs. Lethbury by the wealth of her chronological allusions. She showed no interest in the significance of the facts she amassed: she simply collected dates as another child might have collected stamps

or marbles. To her foster-mother she seemed a prodigy of wisdom; but Lethbury saw, with a secret movement of sympathy, how the aptitudes in which Mrs. Lethbury gloried were slowly estranging her from their possessor.

"She is getting too clever for me," his wife said to him, after one of Jane's historical flights, "but I am so glad that she will be a companion to you."

Lethbury groaned in spirit. He did not look forward to Jane's companionship. She was still a good little girl: but there was something automatic and formal in her goodness, as though it were a kind of moral calisthenics that she went through for the sake of showing her agility. An early consciousness of virtue had moreover constituted her the natural guardian and adviser of her elders. Before she was fifteen she had set about reforming the household. She took Mrs. Lethbury in hand first; then she extended her efforts to the servants, with consequences more disastrous to the domestic harmony; and lastly she applied herself to Lethbury. She proved to him by statistics that he smoked too much, and that it was injurious to the optic nerve to read in bed. She took him to task for not going to church more regularly, and pointed out to him the evils of desultory reading. She suggested that a regular course of study encourages mental concentration, and hinted that inconsecutiveness of thought is a sign of approaching age.

To her adopted mother her suggestions were equally pertinent. She instructed Mrs. Lethbury in an improved way of making beef stock, and called her attention to the unhygienic qualities of carpets. She poured out distracting facts about bacilli and vegetable mould, and demonstrated that curtains and picture-frames are a hot-bed of animal organisms. She learned by heart the nutritive ingredients of the principal articles of diet, and revolutionized the cuisine by an attempt to establish a scientific average between starch and phosphates. Four cooks left during this experiment, and Lethbury fell into the habit of dining at his club.

Once or twice, at the outset, he had tried to check Jane's ardor; but his efforts resulted only in hurting his wife's feelings. Jane remained impervious, and Mrs. Lethbury resented any attempt to protect her from her daughter. Lethbury saw that she was consoled for the sense of her own inferiority by the thought of what Jane's intellectual companionship must be to him; and he tried to keep up the illusion by enduring with what grace he might the blighting edification of Jane's discourse.

V

As Jane grew up, he sometimes avenged himself by wondering if his wife was still sorry that they had not called her Muriel. Jane was not ugly; she developed, indeed, a kind of categorical prettiness that might have been a projection of her mind. She had a creditable collection of features, but one had to take an inventory of them to find out that she was good-looking. The fusing grace had been omitted.

Mrs. Lethbury took a touching pride in her daughter's first steps in the world. She expected Jane to take by her complexion those whom she did not capture by her learning. But Jane's rosy freshness did not work any perceptible ravages. Whether the young men guessed the axioms on her lips and detected the encyclopaedia in her eye, or whether they simply found no intrinsic interest in these features, certain it is, that, in spite of her mother's heroic efforts, and of incessant calls on Lethbury's purse, Jane, at the end of her first season, had dropped hopelessly out of the running. A few duller girls found her interesting, and one or two young men came to the house with the object of meeting other young women; but she was rapidly becoming one of the social supernumeraries who are asked out only because they are on people's lists.

The blow was bitter to Mrs. Lethbury; but she consoled herself with the idea that Jane had failed because she was too clever. Jane probably shared this conviction; at all events she betrayed no consciousness of failure. She had developed a pronounced taste for society, and went out, unweariedly and obstinately, winter after winter, while Mrs.

Lethbury toiled in her wake, showering attentions on oblivious hostesses. To Lethbury there was something at once tragic and exasperating in the sight of their two figures, the one conciliatory, the other dogged, both pursuing with unabated zeal the elusive prize of popularity. He even began to feel a personal stake in the pursuit, not as it concerned Jane, but as it affected his wife. He saw that the latter was the victim of Jane's disappointment: that Jane was not above the crude satisfaction of "taking it out" of her mother. Experience checked the impulse to come to his wife's defence; and when his resentment was at its height, Jane disarmed him by giving up the struggle.

Nothing was said to mark her capitulation; but Lethbury noticed that the visiting ceased, and that the dressmaker's bills diminished. At the same time, Mrs. Lethbury made it known that Jane had taken up charities; and before long Jane's conversation confirmed this announcement. At first Lethbury congratulated himself on the change; but Jane's domesticity soon began to weigh on him. During the day she was sometimes absent on errands of mercy; but in the evening she was always there. At first she and Mrs. Lethbury sat in the drawing-room together, and Lethbury smoked in the library; but presently Jane formed the habit of joining him there, and he began to suspect that he was included among the objects of her philanthropy.

Mrs. Lethbury confirmed the suspicion. "Jane has grown very serious-minded lately," she said. "She imagines that she used to neglect you, and she is trying to make up for it. Don't discourage her," she added innocently.

Such a plea delivered Lethbury helpless to his daughter's ministrations: and he found himself measuring the hours he spent with her by the amount of relief they must be affording her mother. There were even moments when he read a furtive gratitude in Mrs. Lethbury's eye.

But Lethbury was no hero, and he had nearly reached the limit of vicarious endurance when something wonderful happened. They never quite knew afterward how it had come about, or who first perceived it; but

Mrs. Lethbury one day gave tremulous voice to their inferences.

"Of course," she said, "he comes here because of Elise." The young lady in question, a friend of Jane's, was possessed of attractions which had already been found to explain the presence of masculine visitors.

Lethbury risked a denial. "I don't think he does," he declared.

"But Elise is thought very pretty," Mrs. Lethbury insisted.

"I can't help that," said Lethbury doggedly.

He saw a faint light in his wife's eyes; but she remarked carelessly: "Mr. Budd would be a very good match for Elise."

Lethbury could hardly repress a chuckle: he was so exquisitely aware that she was trying to propitiate the gods.

For a few weeks neither said a word; then Mrs. Lethbury once more reverted to the subject.

"It is a month since Elise went abroad," she said.

"Is it?"

"And Mr. Budd seems to come here just as often--"

"Ah," said Lethbury with heroic indifference; and his wife hastily changed the subject.

Mr. Winstanley Budd was a young man who suffered from an excess of manner. Politeness gushed from him in the driest seasons. He was always performing feats of drawing-room chivalry, and the approach of the most unobtrusive female threw him into attitudes which endangered the furniture. His features, being of the cherubic order, did not lend themselves to this role; but there were moments when he appeared to dominate them, to force them into compliance with an aquiline ideal. The range of Mr. Budd's social benevolence made its object hard to

distinguish. He spread his cloak so indiscriminately that one could not always interpret the gesture, and Jane's impassive manner had the effect of increasing his demonstrations: she threw him into paroxysms of politeness.

At first he filled the house with his amenities; but gradually it became apparent that his most dazzling effects were directed exclusively to Jane. Lethbury and his wife held their breath and looked away from each other. They pretended not to notice the frequency of Mr. Budd's visits, they struggled against an imprudent inclination to leave the young people too much alone. Their conclusions were the result of indirect observation, for neither of them dared to be caught watching Mr. Budd: they behaved like naturalists on the trail of a rare butterfly.

In his efforts not to notice Mr. Budd, Lethbury centred his attentions on Jane; and Jane, at this crucial moment, wrung from him a reluctant admiration. While her parents went about dissembling their emotions, she seemed to have none to conceal. She betrayed neither eagerness nor surprise; so complete was her unconcern that there were moments when Lethbury feared it was obtuseness, when he could hardly help whispering to her that now was the moment to lower the net.

Meanwhile the velocity of Mr. Budd's gyrations increased with the ardor of courtship: his politeness became incandescent, and Jane found herself the centre of a pyrotechnical display culminating in the "set piece" of an offer of marriage.

Mrs. Lethbury imparted the news to her husband one evening after their daughter had gone to bed. The announcement was made and received with an air of detachment, as though both feared to be betrayed into unseemly exultation; but Lethbury, as his wife ended, could not repress the inquiry, "Have they decided on a day?"

Mrs. Lethbury's superior command of her features enabled her to look shocked. "What can you be thinking of? He only offered himself at five!"

"Of course--of course--" stammered Lethbury--"but nowadays people marry after such short engagements--"

"Engagement!" said his wife solemnly. "There is no engagement."

Lethbury dropped his cigar. "What on earth do you mean?"

"Jane is thinking it over."

_ "Thinking it over?" _ "She has asked for a month before deciding."

Lethbury sank back with a gasp. Was it genius or was it madness? He felt incompetent to decide; and Mrs. Lethbury's next words showed that she shared his difficulty.

"Of course I don't want to hurry Jane--"

"Of course not," he acquiesced.

"But I pointed out to her that a young man of Mr. Budd's impulsive temperament might--might be easily discouraged--"

"Yes; and what did she say?"

"She said that if she was worth winning she was worth waiting for."

VI

The period of Mr. Budd's probation could scarcely have cost him as much mental anguish as it caused his would-be parents-in-law.

Mrs. Lethbury, by various ruses, tried to shorten the ordeal, but Jane remained inexorable; and each morning Lethbury came down to breakfast with the certainty of finding a letter of withdrawal from her discouraged suitor.

When at length the decisive day came, and Mrs. Lethbury, at its close,

stole into the library with an air of chastened joy, they stood for a moment without speaking; then Mrs. Lethbury paid a fitting tribute to the proprieties by faltering out: "It will be dreadful to have to give her up--"

Lethbury could not repress a warning gesture; but even as it escaped him, he realized that his wife's grief was genuine.

"Of course, of course," he said, vainly sounding his own emotional shallows for an answering regret. And yet it was his wife who had suffered most from Jane!

He had fancied that these sufferings would be effaced by the milder atmosphere of their last weeks together; but felicity did not soften Jane. Not for a moment did she relax her dominion: she simply widened it to include a new subject. Mr. Budd found himself under orders with the others; and a new fear assailed Lethbury as he saw Jane assume prenuptial control of her betrothed. Lethbury had never felt any strong personal interest in Mr. Budd; but, as Jane's prospective husband, the young man excited his sympathy. To his surprise, he found that Mrs. Lethbury shared the feeling.

"I'm afraid he may find Jane a little exacting," she said, after an evening dedicated to a stormy discussion of the wedding arrangements. "She really ought to make some concessions. If he wants to be married in a black frock-coat instead of a dark gray one--" She paused and looked doubtfully at Lethbury.

"What can I do about it?" he said.

"You might explain to him--tell him that Jane isn't always--"

Lethbury made an impatient gesture. "What are you afraid of? His finding her out or his not finding her out?"

Mrs. Lethbury flushed. "You put it so dreadfully!"

Her husband mused for a moment; then he said with an air of cheerful hypocrisy: "After all, Budd is old enough to take care of himself."

But the next day Mrs. Lethbury surprised him. Late in the afternoon she entered the library, so breathless and inarticulate that he scented a catastrophe.

"I've done it!" she cried.

"Done what?"

"Told him." She nodded toward the door. "He's just gone. Jane is out, and I had a chance to talk to him alone."

Lethbury pushed a chair forward and she sank into it.

"What did you tell him? That she is not always--"

Mrs. Lethbury lifted a tragic eye. "No; I told him that she always is --"

"Always is --?"

"Yes."

There was a pause. Lethbury made a call on his hoarded philosophy. He saw Jane suddenly reinstated in her evening seat by the library fire; but an answering chord in him thrilled at his wife's heroism.

"Well--what did he say?"

Mrs. Lethbury's agitation deepened. It was clear that the blow had fallen.

"He...he said...that we...had never understood Jane... or appreciated her..." The final syllables were lost in her handkerchief, and she left him marvelling at the mechanism of a woman.

After that, Lethbury faced the future with an undaunted eye. They had done their duty--at least his wife had done hers--and they were reaping the usual harvest of ingratitude with a zest seldom accorded to such reaping. There was a marked change in Mr. Budd's manner, and his increasing coldness sent a genial glow through Lethbury's system. It was easy to bear with Jane in the light of Mr. Budd's disapproval.

There was a good deal to be borne in the last days, and the brunt of it fell on Mrs. Lethbury. Jane marked her transition to the married state by an appropriate but incongruous display of nerves. She became sentimental, hysterical and reluctant. She quarrelled with her betrothed and threatened to return the ring. Mrs. Lethbury had to intervene, and Lethbury felt the hovering sword of destiny. But the blow was suspended. Mr. Budd's chivalry was proof against all his bride's caprices, and his devotion throve on her cruelty. Lethbury feared that he was too faithful, too enduring, and longed to urge him to vary his tactics. Jane presently reappeared with the ring on her finger, and consented to try on the wedding-dress; but her uncertainties, her reactions, were prolonged till the final day.

When it dawned, Lethbury was still in an ecstasy of apprehension. Feeling reasonably sure of the principal actors, he had centred his fears on incidental possibilities. The clergyman might have a stroke, or the church might burn down, or there might be something wrong with the license. He did all that was humanly possible to avert such contingencies, but there remained that incalculable factor known as the hand of God. Lethbury seemed to feel it groping for him.

In the church it almost had him by the nape. Mr. Budd was late; and for five immeasurable minutes Lethbury and Jane faced a churchful of conjecture. Then the bridegroom appeared, flushed but chivalrous, and explaining to his father-in-law under cover of the ritual that he had torn his glove and had to go back for another.

"You'll be losing the ring next," muttered Lethbury; but Mr. Budd produced this article punctually, and a moment or two later was bearing its wearer captive down the aisle.

At the wedding-breakfast Lethbury caught his wife's eye fixed on him in mild disapproval, and understood that his hilarity was exceeding the bounds of fitness. He pulled himself together, and tried to subdue his tone; but his jubilation bubbled over like a champagne-glass perpetually refilled. The deeper his draughts, the higher it rose.

It was at the brim when, in the wake of the dispersing guests, Jane came down in her travelling-dress and fell on her mother's neck.

"I can't leave you!" she wailed, and Lethbury felt as suddenly sobered as a man under a douche. But if the bride was reluctant her captor was relentless. Never had Mr. Budd been more dominant, more aquiline. Lethbury's last fears were dissipated as the young man snatched Jane from her mother's bosom and bore her off to the brougham.

The brougham rolled away, the last milliner's girl forsook her post by the awning, the red carpet was folded up, and the house door closed. Lethbury stood alone in the hall with his wife. As he turned toward her, he noticed the look of tired heroism in her eyes, the deepened lines of her face. They reflected his own symptoms too accurately not to appeal to him. The nervous tension had been horrible. He went up to her, and an answering impulse made her lay a hand on his arm. He held it there a moment.

"Let us go off and have a jolly little dinner at a restaurant," he proposed.

There had been a time when such a suggestion would have surprised her to the verge of disapproval; but now she agreed to it at once.

"Oh, that would be so nice," she murmured with a great sigh of relief and assuagement.

Jane had fulfilled her mission after all: she had drawn them together at last.

LITTLE ANKLEBONE

by Flora Annie Steel

from *Tales Of The Punjab*

EBook #6145

Once upon a time there was a little boy who lost his parents; so he went to live with his Auntie, and she set him to herd sheep. All day long the little fellow wandered barefoot through the pathless plain, tending his flock, and playing his tiny shepherd's pipe from morn till eve.

But one day came a great big wolf, and looked hungrily at the small shepherd and his fat sheep, saying, 'Little boy! shall I eat you, or your sheep?' Then the little boy answered politely, 'I don't know, Mr. Wolf; I must ask my Auntie.'

So all day long he piped away on his tiny pipe, and in the evening, when he brought the flock home, he went to his Auntie and said, 'Auntie dear, a great big wolf asked me to-day if he should eat me, or your sheep. Which shall it be?'

Then his Auntie looked at the wee little shepherd, and at the fat flock, and said sharply, 'Which shall it be?--why, you, of course!'

So next morning the little boy drove his flock out into the pathless plain, and blew away cheerfully on his shepherd's pipe until the great big wolf appeared. Then he laid aside his pipe, and, going up to the savage beast, said, 'Oh, if you please, Mr. Wolf, I asked my Auntie, and she says you are to eat me.'

Now the wolf, savage as wolves always are, could not help having just a spark of pity for the tiny barefoot shepherd who played his pipe so sweetly, therefore he said kindly, 'Could I do anything for you, little boy, after I've eaten you?'

'Thank you!' returned the tiny shepherd. 'If you would be so kind,

after you've picked the bones, as to thread my anklebone on a string and hang it on the tree that weeps over the pond yonder, I shall be much obliged.'

So the wolf ate the little shepherd, picked the bones, and afterwards hung the anklebone by a string to the branches of the tree, where it danced and swung in the sunlight.

Now, one day, three robbers, who had just robbed a palace, happening to pass that way, sat down under the tree and began to divide the spoil. Just as they had arranged all the golden dishes and precious jewels and costly stuffs into three heaps, a jackal howled. Now you must know that thieves always use the jackal's cry as a note of warning, so that when at the very same moment Little Anklebone's thread snapped, and he fell plump on the head of the chief robber, the man imagined some one had thrown a pebble at him, and, shouting 'Run! run!--we are discovered!' he bolted away as hard as he could, followed by his companions, leaving all the treasure behind them.

'Now,' said Little Anklebone to himself, 'I shall lead a fine life!'

So he gathered the treasure together, and sat under the tree that drooped over the pond, and played so sweetly on a new shepherd's pipe, that all the beasts of the forest, and the birds of the air, and the fishes of the pond came to listen to him. Then Little Anklebone put marble basins round the pond for the animals to drink out of, and in the evening the does, and the tigresses, and the she-wolves gathered round him to be milked, and when he had drunk his fill he milked the rest into the pond, till at last it became a pond of milk. And Little Anklebone sat by the milken pond and piped away on his shepherd's pipe.

Now, one day, an old woman, passing by with her jar for water, heard the sweet strains of Little Anklebone's pipe, and following the sound, came upon the pond of milk, and saw the animals, and the birds, and the fishes, listening to the music. She was wonderstruck, especially when Little Anklebone, from his seat under the tree, called out, 'Fill your jar, mother! All drink who come hither!'

Then the old woman filled her jar with milk, and went on her way rejoicing at her good fortune. But as she journeyed she met with the King of that country, who, having been a-hunting, had lost his way in the pathless plain.

'Give me a drink of water, good mother,' he cried, seeing the jar; 'I am half dead with thirst!'

'It is milk, my son,' replied the old woman; 'I got it yonder from a milken pond.' Then she told the King of the wonders she had seen, so that he resolved to have a peep at them himself. And when he saw the milken pond, and all the animals and birds and fishes gathered round, while Little Anklebone played ever so sweetly on his shepherd's pipe, he said, 'I must have the tiny piper, if I die for it!'

No sooner did Little Anklebone hear these words than he set off at a run, and the King after him. Never was there such a chase before or since, for Little Anklebone hid himself amid the thickest briars and thorns, and the King was so determined to have the tiny piper, that he did not care for scratches. At last the King was successful, but no sooner did he take hold of Little Anklebone than the clouds above began to thunder and lighten horribly, and from below came the lowing of many does, and louder than all came the voice of the little piper himself singing these words--

'O clouds! why should you storm and flare?

Poor Anklebone is forced to roam.

O does! why wait the milker's care?

Poor Anklebone must leave his home.'

And he sang so piercingly sweet that pity filled the King's heart, especially when he saw it was nothing but a bone after all. So he let it go again, and the little piper went back to his seat under the tree by the pond; and there he sits still, and plays his shepherd's pipe, while all the beasts of the forest, and birds of the air, and fishes of the pond, gather round and listen to his music. And sometimes, people wandering through the pathless plain hear the pipe, and then

they say, 'That is Little Anklebone, who was eaten by a wolf ages ago!'

THE TUPPENNY MILLIONAIRE

by P. G. Wodehouse

from *The Man Upstairs and Other Stories*

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In the crowd that strolled on the Promenade des Etrangers, enjoying the morning sunshine, there were some who had come to Roveille for their health, others who wished to avoid the rigours of the English spring, and many more who liked the place because it was cheap and close to Monte Carlo.

None of these motives had brought George Albert Balmer. He was there because, three weeks before, Harold Flower had called him a vegetable.

What is it that makes men do perilous deeds? Why does a man go over Niagara Falls in a barrel? Not for his health. Half an hour with a skipping-rope would be equally beneficial to his liver. No; in nine cases out of ten he does it to prove to his friends and relations that he is not the mild, steady-going person they have always thought him. Observe the music-hall acrobat as he prepares to swing from the roof by his eyelids. His gaze sweeps the house. 'It isn't true,' it seems to say. 'I'm not a jelly-fish.'

It was so with George Balmer.

In London at the present moment there exist some thousands of respectable, neatly-dressed, mechanical, unenterprising young men, employed at modest salaries by various banks, corporations, stores, shops, and business firms. They are put to work when young, and they stay put. They are mussels. Each has his special place on the rock, and remains glued to it all his life.

To these thousands George Albert Balmer belonged. He differed in no detail from the rest of the great army. He was as respectable, as neatly-dressed, as mechanical, and as unenterprising. His life was bounded, east, west, north, and south, by the Planet Insurance Company, which employed him; and that there were other ways in which a man might

fulfil himself than by giving daily imitations behind a counter of a mechanical figure walking in its sleep had never seriously crossed his mind.

On George, at the age of twenty-four, there descended, out of a dear sky, a legacy of a thousand pounds.

Physically, he remained unchanged beneath the shock. No trace of hauteur crept into his bearing. When the head of his department, calling his attention to a technical flaw in his work of the previous afternoon, addressed him as 'Here, you--young what's-your-confounded-name!' he did not point out that this was no way to speak to a gentleman of property. You would have said that the sudden smile of Fortune had failed to unsettle him.

But all the while his mind, knocked head over heels, was lying in a limp heap, wondering what had struck it.

To him, in his dazed state, came Harold Flower. Harold, messenger to the Planet Insurance Company and one of the most assiduous money-borrowers in London, had listened to the office gossip about the legacy as if to the strains of some grand, sweet anthem. He was a bibulous individual of uncertain age, who, in the intervals of creeping about his duties, kept an eye open for possible additions to his staff of creditors. Most of the clerks at the Planet had been laid under contribution by him in their time, for Harold had a way with him that was good for threepence any pay-day, and it seemed to him that things had come to a sorry pass if he could not extract something special from Plutocrat Balmer in his hour of rejoicing.

Throughout the day he shadowed George, and, shortly before closing-time, backed him into a corner, tapped him on the chest, and requested the temporary loan of a sovereign.

In the same breath he told him that he was a gentleman, that a messenger's life was practically that of a blanky slave, and that a young man of spirit who wished to add to his already large fortune would have a bit on Giant Gooseberry for the City and Suburban. He then

paused for a reply.

Now, all through the day George had been assailed by a steady stream of determined ear-biters. Again and again he had been staked out as an ore-producing claim by men whom it would have been impolitic to rebuff. He was tired of lending, and in a mood to resent unauthorized demands. Harold Flower's struck him as particularly unauthorized. He said so.

It took some little time to convince Mr Flower that he really meant it, but, realizing at last the grim truth, he drew a long breath and spoke.

'Ho!' he said. 'Afraid you can't spare it, can't you? A gentleman comes and asks you with tack and civility for a temp'y loan of about 'arf nothing, and all you do is to curse and swear at him. Do you know what I call you--you and your thousand quid? A tuppenny millionaire, that's what I call you. Keep your blooming money. That's all I ask. _Keep_ it. Much good you'll get out of it. I know your sort. You'll never have any pleasure of it. Not you. You're the careful sort. You'll put it into Consols, _you_ will, and draw your three-ha'pence a year. Money wasn't meant for your kind. It don't _mean_ nothing to you. You ain't got the go in you to appreciate it. A vegetable--that's all you are. A blanky little vegetable. A blanky little gor-blimey vegetable. I seen turnips with more spirit in 'em than what you've got. And Brussels sprouts. Yes, _and_ parsnips.'

It is difficult to walk away with dignity when a man with a hoarse voice and a watery eye is comparing you to your disadvantage with a parsnip, and George did not come anywhere near achieving the feat. But he extricated himself somehow, and went home brooding.

Mr Flower's remarks rankled particularly because it so happened that Consols were the identical investment on which he had decided. His Uncle Robert, with whom he lived as a paying guest, had strongly advocated them. Also they had suggested themselves to him independently.

But Harold Flower's words gave him pause. They made him think. For two weeks and some days he thought, flushing uncomfortably whenever he met

that watery but contemptuous eye. And then came the day of his annual vacation, and with it inspiration. He sought out the messenger, whom till now he had carefully avoided.

'Er--Flower,' he said.

'Me lord?'

'I am taking my holiday tomorrow. Will you forward my letters? I will wire you the address. I have not settled on my hotel yet. I am popping over'--he paused--'I am popping over,' he resumed, carelessly, 'to Monte.'

'To who?' inquired Mr Flower.

'To Monte. Monte Carlo, you know.'

Mr Flower blinked twice rapidly, then pulled himself together.

'Yus, I _don't_ think!' he said.

And that settled it.

The George who strolled that pleasant morning on the Promenade des Strangers differed both externally and internally from the George who had fallen out with Harold Flower in the offices of the Planet Insurance Company. For a day after his arrival he had clung to the garb of middle-class England. On the second he had discovered that this was unpleasantly warm and, worse, conspicuous. At the Casino Municipale that evening he had observed a man wearing an arrangement in bright yellow velvet without attracting attention. The sight had impressed him. Next morning he had emerged from his hotel in a flannel suit so light that it had been unanimously condemned as impossible by his Uncle Robert, his Aunt Louisa, his Cousins Percy, Eva, and Geraldine, and his Aunt Louisa's mother, and at a shop in the Rue Lasalle had spent twenty francs on a Homburg hat. And Roville had taken it without blinking.

Internally his alteration had been even more considerable. Roville was

not Monte Carlo (in which gay spot he had remained only long enough to send a picture post-card to Harold Flower before retiring down the coast to find something cheaper), but it had been a revelation to him. For the first time in his life he was seeing colour, and it intoxicated him. The silky blueness of the sea was startling. The pure white of the great hotels along the promenade and the Casino Municipale fascinated him. He was dazzled. At the Casino the pillars were crimson and cream, the tables sky-blue and pink. Seated on a green-and-white striped chair he watched a _revue_, of which from start to finish he understood but one word--'out', to wit--absorbed in the doings of a red-moustached gentleman in blue who wrangled in rapid French with a black-moustached gentleman in yellow, while a snow-white _commere_ and a _compere_ in a mauve flannel suit looked on at the brawl.

It was during that evening that there flitted across his mind the first suspicion he had ever had that his Uncle Robert's mental outlook was a little limited.

And now, as he paced the promenade, watching the stir and bustle of the crowd, he definitely condemned his absent relative as a narrow-minded chump.

If the brown boots which he had polished so assiduously in his bedroom that morning with the inside of a banana-skin, and which now gleamed for the first time on his feet, had a fault, it was that they were a shade tight. To promenade with the gay crowd, therefore, for any length of time was injudicious; and George, warned by a red-hot shooting sensation that the moment had arrived for rest, sank down gracefully on a seat, to rise at once on discovering that between him and it was something oblong with sharp corners.

It was a book--a fat new novel. George drew it out and inspected it. There was a name inside--Julia Waveney.

George, from boyhood up, had been raised in that school of thought whose watchword is 'Findings are keepings', and, having ascertained that there was no address attached to the name, he was on the point, I regret to say, of pouching the volume, which already he looked upon as

his own, when a figure detached itself from the crowd, and he found himself gazing into a pair of grey and, to his startled conscience, accusing eyes.

'Oh, thank you! I was afraid it was lost.'

She was breathing quickly, and there was a slight flush on her face. She took the book from George's unresisting hand and rewarded him with a smile.

'I missed it, and I couldn't think where I could have left it. Then I remembered that I had been sitting here. Thank you so much.'

She smiled again, turned, and walked away, leaving George to reckon up all the social solecisms he had contrived to commit in the space of a single moment. He had remained seated, he reminded himself, throughout the interview; one. He had not raised his hat, that fascinating Homburg simply made to be raised with a debonair swish under such conditions; two. Call it three, because he ought to have raised it twice. He had gaped like a fool; four. And, five, he had not uttered a single word of acknowledgement in reply to her thanks.

Five vast bloomers in under a minute! What could she have thought of him? The sun ceased to shine. What sort of an utter outsider could she have considered him? An east wind sprang up. What kind of a Cockney bounder and cad could she have taken him for? The sea turned to an oily grey; and George, rising, strode back in the direction of his hotel in a mood that made him forget that he had brown boots on at all.

His mind was active. Several times since he had come to Roville he had been conscious of a sensation which he could not understand, a vague, yearning sensation, a feeling that, splendid as everything was in this paradise of colour, there was nevertheless something lacking. Now he understood. You had to be in love to get the full flavour of these vivid whites and blues. He was getting it now. His mood of dejection had passed swiftly, to be succeeded by an exhilaration such as he had only felt once in his life before, about half-way through a dinner given to the Planet staff on a princely scale by a retiring general

manager.

He was exalted. Nothing seemed impossible to him. He would meet the girl again on the promenade, he told himself, dashingly renew the acquaintance, show her that he was not the gaping idiot he had appeared. His imagination donned its seven-league boots. He saw himself proposing--eloquently--accepted, married, living happily ever after.

It occurred to him that an excellent first move would be to find out where she was staying. He bought a paper and turned to the list of visitors. Miss Waveney. Where was it. He ran his eye down the column.

And then, with a crash, down came his air-castles in hideous ruin.

'Hotel Cercle de la Mediterranee. Lord Frederick Weston. The Countess of Southborne and the Hon. Adelaide Liss. Lady Julia Waveney--'

He dropped the paper and hobbled on to his hotel. His boots had begun to hurt him again, for he no longer walked on air.

* * * * *

At Roville there are several institutions provided by the municipality for the purpose of enabling visitors temporarily to kill thought. Chief among these is the Casino Municipale, where, for a price, the sorrowful may obtain oblivion by means of the ingenious game of _boule_. Disappointed lovers at Roville take to _boule_ as in other places they might take to drink. It is a fascinating game. A wooden-faced high priest flicks a red india-rubber ball into a polished oaken bowl, at the bottom of which are holes, each bearing a number up to nine. The ball swings round and round like a planet, slows down, stumbles among the holes, rests for a moment in the one which you have backed, then hops into the next one, and you lose. If ever there was a pastime calculated to place young Adam Cupid in the background, this is it.

To the _boule_ tables that night fled George with his hopeless passion. From the instant when he read the fatal words in the paper he had recognized its hopelessness. All other obstacles he had been

prepared to overcome, but a title--no. He had no illusions as to his place in the social scale. The Lady Julias of this world did not marry insurance clerks, even if their late mother's cousin had left them a thousand pounds. That day-dream was definitely ended. It was a thing of the past--all over except the heartache.

By way of a preliminary sip of the waters of Lethe, before beginning the full draught, he placed a franc on number seven and lost. Another franc on six suffered the same fate. He threw a five-franc cart-wheel recklessly on evens. It won.

It was enough. Thrusting his hat on the back of his head and wedging himself firmly against the table, he settled down to make a night of it.

There is nothing like _boule_ for absorbing the mind. It was some time before George became aware that a hand was prodding him in the ribs. He turned, irritated. Immediately behind him, filling the landscape, were two stout Frenchmen. But, even as he searched his brain for words that would convey to them in their native tongue his disapproval of this jostling, he perceived that they, though stout and in a general way offensive, were in this particular respect guiltless. The prodding hand belonged to somebody invisible behind them. It was small and gloved, a woman's hand. It held a five-franc piece.

Then in a gap, caused by a movement in the crowd, he saw the face of Lady Julia Waveney.

She smiled at him.

'On eight, please, would you mind?' he heard her say, and then the crowd shifted again and she disappeared, leaving him holding the coin, his mind in a whirl.

The game of _boule_ demands undivided attention from its devotees. To play with a mind full of other matters is a mistake. This mistake George made. Hardly conscious of what he was doing, he flung the coin on the board. She had asked him to place it on eight, and he thought

that he had placed it on eight. That, in reality, blinded by emotion, he had placed it on three was a fact which came home to him neither then nor later.

Consequently, when the ball ceased to roll and a sepulchral voice croaked the news that eight was the winning number, he fixed on the croupier a gaze that began by being joyful and expectant and ended, the croupier remaining entirely unresponsive, by being wrathful.

He leaned towards him.

'Monsieur,' he said. '_Moi! J'ai jete cinq francs sur huit!_'

The croupier was a man with a pointed moustache and an air of having seen all the sorrow and wickedness that there had ever been in the world. He twisted the former and permitted a faint smile to deepen the melancholy of the latter, but he did not speak.

George moved to his side. The two stout Frenchmen had strolled off, leaving elbow-room behind them.

He tapped the croupier on the shoulder.

'I say,' he said. 'What's the game? _J'ai jete cinq francs sur huit, I tell you, _moi!_'

A forgotten idiom from the days of boyhood and French exercises came to him.

'_Moi qui parle_, ' he added.

'_Messieurs, faites vos jeux_, ' crooned the croupier, in a detached manner.

To the normal George, as to most Englishmen of his age, the one cardinal rule in life was at all costs to avoid rendering himself conspicuous in public. Than George normal, no violet that ever hid itself in a mossy bank could have had a greater distaste for scenes.

But tonight he was not normal. Renville and its colour had wrought a sort of fever in his brain. _Boule_ had increased it. And love had caused it to rage. If this had been entirely his own affair it is probable that the croupier's frigid calm would have quelled him and he would have retired, fermenting but baffled. But it was not his own affair. He was fighting the cause of the only girl in the world. She had trusted him. Could he fail her? No, he was dashed if he could. He would show her what he was made of. His heart swelled within him. A thrill permeated his entire being, starting at his head and running out at his heels. He felt tremendous--a sort of blend of Oliver Cromwell, a Berserk warrior, and Sir Galahad.

'Monsieur,' he said again. 'Hi! What about it?'

This time the croupier did speak.

'_C'est fini_,' he said; and print cannot convey the pensive scorn of his voice. It stung George, in his exalted mood, like a blow. Finished, was it? All right, now he would show them. They had asked for it, and now they should get it. How much did it come to? Five francs the stake had been, and you got seven times your stake. And you got your stake back. He was nearly forgetting that. Forty francs in all, then. Two of those gold what-d'you-call'ems, in fact. Very well, then.

He leaned forward quickly across the croupier, snatched the lid off the gold tray, and removed two louis.

It is a remarkable fact in life that the scenes which we have rehearsed in our minds never happen as we have pictured them happening. In the present case, for instance, it had been George's intention to handle the subsequent stages of this little dispute with an easy dignity. He had proposed, the money obtained, to hand it over to its rightful owner, raise his hat, and retire with an air, a gallant champion of the oppressed. It was probably about one-sixteenth of a second after his hand had closed on the coins that he realized in the most vivid manner that these were not the lines on which the incident was to develop, and, with all his heart, he congratulated himself on having discarded those brown boots in favour of a worn but roomy pair of gent's Oxfords.

For a moment there was a pause and a silence of utter astonishment, while the minds of those who had witnessed the affair adjusted themselves to the marvel, and then the world became full of starting eyes, yelling throats, and clutching hands. From all over the casino fresh units swarmed like bees to swell the crowd at the centre of things. Promenaders ceased to promenade, waiters to wait. Elderly gentlemen sprang on to tables.

But in that momentary pause George had got off the mark. The table at which he had been standing was the one nearest to the door, and he had been on the door side of it. As the first eyes began to start, the first throats to yell, and the first hands to clutch, he was passing the counter of the money-changer. He charged the swing-door at full speed, and, true to its mission, it swung. He had a vague glimpse from the corner of his eye of the hat-and-cloak counter, and then he was in the square with the cold night breeze blowing on his forehead and the stars winking down from the blue sky.

A paper-seller on the pavement, ever the man of business, stepped forward and offered him the Paris edition of the _Daily Mail_, and, being in the direct line of transit, shot swiftly into the road and fell into a heap, while George, shaken but going well, turned off to the left, where there seemed to be rather more darkness than anywhere else.

And then the casino disgorged the pursuers.

To George, looking hastily over his shoulder, there seemed a thousand of them. The square rang with their cries. He could not understand them, but gathered that they were uncomplimentary. At any rate, they stimulated a little man in evening dress strolling along the pavement towards him, to become suddenly animated and to leap from side to side with outstretched arms.

Panic makes Harlequin three-quarters of us all. For one who had never played Rugby football George handled the situation well. He drew the defence with a feint to the left, then, swerving to the right, shot

past into the friendly darkness. From behind came the ringing of feet and an evergrowing din.

It is one of the few compensations a fugitive pursued by a crowd enjoys that, while he has space for his manoeuvres, those who pursue are hampered by their numbers. In the little regiment that pounded at his heels it is probable that there were many faster runners than George. On the other hand, there were many slower, and in the early stages of the chase these impeded their swifter brethren. At the end of the first half-minute, therefore, George, not sparing himself, had drawn well ahead, and for the first time found leisure for connected thought.

His brain became preternaturally alert, so that when, rounding a corner, he perceived entering the main road from a side-street in front of him a small knot of pedestrians, he did not waver, but was seized with a keen spasm of presence of mind. Without pausing in his stride, he pointed excitedly before him, and at the same moment shouted the words, ' _La! La! Vite! Vite!_ '

His stock of French was small, but it ran to that, and for his purpose it was ample. The French temperament is not stolid. When the French temperament sees a man running rapidly and pointing into the middle distance and hears him shouting, ' _La! La! Vite! Vite!_ ' it does not stop to make formal inquiries. It sprints like a mustang. It did so now, with the happy result that a moment later George was racing down the road, the centre and recognized leader of an enthusiastic band of six, which, in the next twenty yards, swelled to eleven.

Five minutes later, in a wine-shop near the harbour, he was sipping the first glass of a bottle of cheap but comforting _vin ordinaire_ while he explained to the interested proprietor, by means of a mixture of English, broken French, and gestures that he had been helping to chase a thief, but had been forced by fatigue to retire prematurely for refreshment. The proprietor gathered, however, that he had every confidence in the zeal of his still active colleagues.

It is convincing evidence of the extent to which love had triumphed over prudence in George's soul that the advisability of lying hid in

his hotel on the following day did not even cross his mind. Immediately after breakfast, or what passed for it at Roville, he set out for the Hotel Cercle de la Mediterranee to hand over the two louis to their owner.

Lady Julia, he was informed on arrival, was out. The porter, politely genial, advised monsieur to seek her on the Promenade des Etrangers.

She was there, on the same seat where she had left the book.

'Good morning,' he said.

She had not seen him coming, and she started at his voice. The flush was back on her face as she turned to him. There was a look of astonishment in the grey eyes.

He held out the two louis.

'I couldn't give them to you last night,' he said.

A horrible idea seized him. It had not occurred to him before.

'I say,' he stammered--'I say, I hope you don't think I had run off with your winnings for good! The croupier wouldn't give them up, you know, so I had to grab them and run. They came to exactly two louis. You put on five francs, you know, and you get seven times your stake. I--'

An elderly lady seated on the bench, who had loomed from behind a parasol towards the middle of these remarks, broke abruptly into speech.

'Who is this young man?'

George looked at her, startled. He had hardly been aware of her presence till now. Rapidly he diagnosed her as a mother--or aunt. She looked more like an aunt. Of course, it must seem odd to her, his charging in like this, a perfect stranger, and beginning to chat with

her daughter, or niece, or whatever it was. He began to justify himself.

'I met your--this young lady'--something told him that was not the proper way to put it, but hang it, what else could he say?--'at the casino last night.'

He stopped. The effect of his words on the elderly lady was remarkable. Her face seemed to turn to stone and become all sharp points. She stared at the girl.

'So you were gambling at the casino last night?' she said.

She rose from the seat, a frozen statue of displeasure.

'I shall return to the hotel. When you have arranged your financial transactions with your--friend, I should like to speak to you. You will find me in my room.'

George looked after her dumbly.

The girl spoke, in a curiously strained voice, as if she were speaking to herself.

'I don't care,' she said. 'I'm glad.'

George was concerned.

'I'm afraid your mother is offended, Lady Julia.'

There was a puzzled look in her grey eyes as they met his. Then they lit up. She leaned back in the seat and began to laugh, softly at first, and then with a note that jarred on George. Whatever the humour of the situation--and he had not detected it at present--this mirth, he felt, was unnatural and excessive.

She checked herself at length, and a flush crept over her face.

'I don't know why I did that,' she said, abruptly. 'I'm sorry. There was nothing funny in what you said. But I'm not Lady Julia, and I have no mother. That was Lady Julia who has just gone, and I am nothing more important than her companion.'

'Her companion!'

'I had better say her late companion. It will soon be that. I had strict orders, you see, not to go near the casino without her--and I went.'

'Then--then I've lost you your job--I mean, your position! If it hadn't been for me she wouldn't have known. I--'

'You have done me a great service,' she said. 'You have cut the painter for me when I have been trying for months to muster up the courage to cut it for myself. I don't suppose you know what it is to get into a groove and long to get out of it and not have the pluck. My brother has been writing to me for a long time to join him in Canada. And I hadn't the courage, or the energy, or whatever it is that takes people out of grooves. I knew I was wasting my life, but I was fairly happy--at least, not unhappy; so--well, there it was. I suppose women are like that.'

'And now--?'

'And now you have jerked me out of the groove. I shall go out to Bob by the first boat.'

He scratched the concrete thoughtfully with his stick.

'It's a hard life out there,' he said.

'But it is a life.'

He looked at the strollers on the promenade. They seemed very far away--in another world.

'Look here,' he said, hoarsely, and stopped. 'May I sit down?' he asked, abruptly. 'I've got something to say, and I can't say it when I'm looking at you.'

He sat down, and fastened his gaze on a yacht that swayed at anchor against the cloudless sky.

'Look here,' he said. 'Will you marry me?'

He heard her turn quickly, and felt her eyes upon him. He went on doggedly.

'I know,' he said, 'we only met yesterday. You probably think I'm mad.'

'I don't think you're mad,' she said, quietly. 'I only think you're too quixotic. You're sorry for me and you are letting a kind impulse carry you away, as you did last night at the casino. It's like you.'

For the first time he turned towards her.

'I don't know what you suppose I am,' he said, 'but I'll tell you. I'm a clerk in an insurance office. I get a hundred a year and ten days' holiday. Did you take me for a millionaire? If I am, I'm only a tuppenny one. Somebody left me a thousand pounds a few weeks ago. That's how I come to be here. Now you know all about me. I don't know anything about you except that I shall never love anybody else. Marry me, and we'll go to Canada together. You say I've helped you out of your groove. Well, I've only one chance of getting out of mine, and that's through you. If you won't help me, I don't care if I get out of it or not. Will you pull me out?'

She did not speak. She sat looking out to sea, past the many-coloured crowd.

He watched her face, but her hat shaded her eyes and he could read nothing in it.

And then, suddenly, without quite knowing how it had got there, he

found that her hand was in his, and he was clutching it as a drowning man clutches a rope.

He could see her eyes now, and there was a message in them that set his heart racing. A great content filled him. She was so companionable, such a friend. It seemed incredible to him that it was only yesterday that they had met for the first time.

'And now,' she said, 'would you mind telling me your name?'

* * * * *

The little waves murmured as they rolled lazily up the beach. Somewhere behind the trees in the gardens a band had begun to play. The breeze, blowing in from the blue Mediterranean, was charged with salt and happiness. And from a seat on the promenade, a young man swept the crowd with a defiant gaze.

'It isn't true,' it seemed to say. 'I'm not a jelly-fish.'